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# THINGS ONE HEARS



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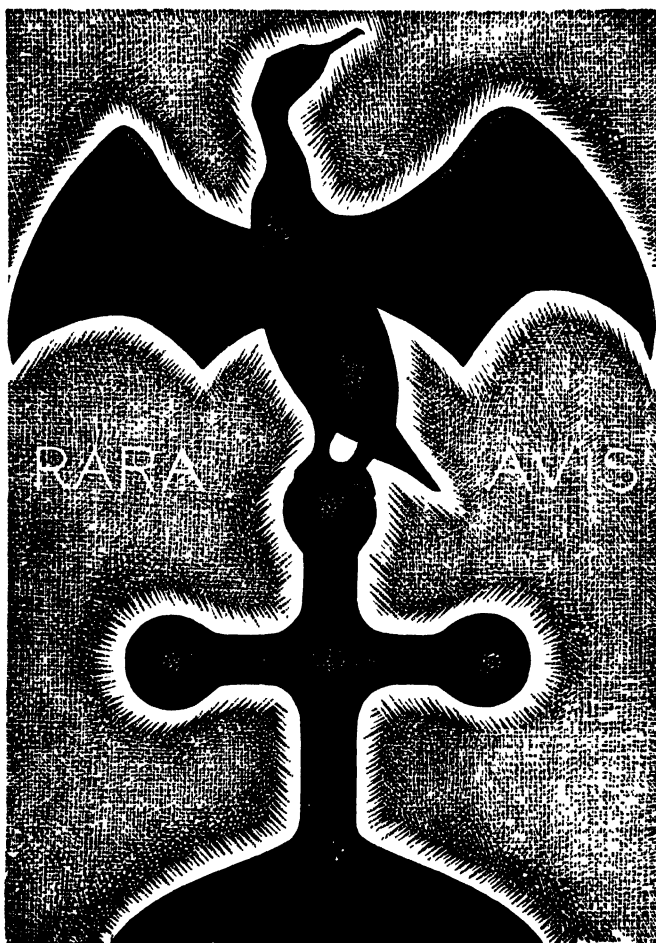
BY ROBERT LYND

I TREMBLE TO THINK  
IN DEFENCE OF PINK  
SEARCHLIGHTS AND NIGHTINGALES  
LIFE'S LITTLE ODDITIES

*Uniform with this volume*



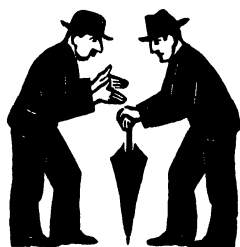




# THINGS ONE HEARS

*by*  
**ROBERT LYND**  
'Y. Y.'

WITH WOOD ENGRAVINGS BY  
CLAIRE OLDHAM



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TO  
RICHARD CHURCH

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## I. BREATH OF LIFE

How often has the human race been warned to breathe properly! Ever since I was growing up I have been urged to perform a number of breathing exercises which would enable me to live as long as I should have lived if I had followed Mr. Gladstone's advice to chew every mouthful of food thirty-two times. But, if one can draw any conclusions from the fact that a new breathing campaign breaks out every other year, one cannot help thinking that no ordinary human being will ever persist in breathing properly unless his inspirations and expirations are supervised daily by a sort of Gestapo. We have all been told again and again how to breathe, but, again and again, instead of breathing as we ought to breathe, we relax, give our ribs a rest, and decide to be natural. As a result, we remain the physical nobodies we were born and no fit fellow planetarians of the athletes of whom Pindar wrote.

Captain W. P. Knowles, M.C., D.Sc., it is said, 'astonished' the Industrial Health Conference at Caxton Hall, Westminster, the other day by 'announcing that the biggest threat to industrial health was caused by the fact that people did not know how to breathe properly.' This

truth would not, if human beings were teachable—as they are only in a very moderate degree—have needed reiteration at the Caxton Hall. It has been proclaimed from imaginary housetops ever since I can remember. Man, however, being one of the laziest of the animals, will not go to the trouble of spending even three minutes every morning in ventilating the apex of his lungs. It is one of the easiest exercises in the world—much easier in middle age than touching the toes without bending the knees. But so strong is our preference of evil to good that we refuse to perform such exercises, even though Captain Knowles assures us that ‘one can do them in working hours, on the bus, or even in bed,’ and that ‘the major ills—heart trouble, rheumatism, and bronchial pneumonia—would be largely offset if people breathed properly.’ Captain Knowles’s system, it is said, has been taken up by the Air Ministry. ‘It was tested at Aldershot,’ he declared, ‘where I was an outside instructor, and the class doing my exercises beat the rest of the school by thirty per cent.’ But will even this persuade you and me to ventilate the apices of our lungs for three minutes for more than the next ten days? I doubt it. The last thing that human beings will learn to do is to keep on doing exercises.

Yet the rewards of deep breathing are worth having. If you want to live to be a hundred, and to enjoy living to be a hundred, all you have to do is to perform breathing exercises for five or ten minutes a day, if you are fit to take any exercise at all, even though you are eighty. Some years ago the seventy-one-year-old Rajah of Aundh came to England to expound the gospel of rejuvenation through rhythmical breathing. All you needed in the way of apparatus, he said, was a small piece of cloth and gym dress. After that you had only to follow a number of simple instructions:

‘Put your feet with toes at edge of cloth, ankle and knee



bones together. John hands resting on chest, fingers close and thumbs at an angle.

'Then stiffen your whole body, beginning with your feet. Push them into the floor. Pull stomach in and up. Do it so that you feel the middle of your spine move back and the base forward. Do not raise shoulders.

'Keep stiff, begin to breathe as you have never breathed before, in seven-time. Count seven for each breath. Fill your lungs in two, hold breath for four, and empty them in one.

'Breathe in through the nose as deeply and quietly as possible, and then out through the mouth with a loud sharp gust. Grunt a bit at the end to expel the last bit of bad air.'

What could be simpler? Push your feet into the floor, pull your stomach in and up, breathe as you have never breathed before, get rid of your breath in a loud sharp gust, and 'grunt a bit at the end to expel the last bit of bad air.' Then, when you have grunted, you are advised to 'smile gently, and feel all the muscles of your face lifting.' I have no doubt that even more than this would happen automatically not long after you had succeeded in pushing your feet into the floor.

Far stranger results than feeling the muscles of one's face lifting are claimed for breathing exercises. Some years ago a French man of science, who had travelled in North Africa, told us how there were illuminati there who by a 'preliminary process of deep and rapid breathing' were able to produce a state of anaesthesia in which it was possible even to have a tooth extracted without pain. In one tribe the magicians take deep-breathing exercises, their respirations increasing in rapidity and in depth till they finally arrive at a state 'bordering on frenzy or a trance'; and at this stage they are able to 'drive nails into their hands and even into their skulls without giving the

slightest sign of discomfort.' Who can deny that it is worth while learning to breathe properly? If we were not so indolent, any one of us might rival the achievements of those African magicians and, as we drove nails into our hands and skulls, become the life and soul of a children's party.

On the other hand, I have a suspicion that breathing, like everything else, ought to be done in moderation. I admit that men as a result of deep breathing may live to be a hundred and be able, with a bland smile, to drive nails into their skulls. But I have never heard of a deep-breather who wrote as good a book as *The Republic* or as good a play as *Hamlet*. Hyper-ventilation, or the concentration of too much oxygen in the blood through breathing too fast, may, we are told, cause dizziness, fainting fits, cramp, paralysis of the muscles, and unconsciousness. In some cases, again, an excess of deep breathing may cause levitation, so that you rise up to the ceiling like a saint. Of one spiritualist medium to whom this happened it is reported that 'on practically every occasion he has risen from the ground horizontally, sometimes to a height of five feet, but sometimes he makes a bad landing, and he has crashed several times.' Breathe as the experts advise you to breathe, and you never know what will happen.

Not that all the authorities on breathing give the same advice. Like other doctors, they disagree. I used to be told to breathe into my chest but, when I went to Harley Street, I was advised: 'Don't trouble about your chest. Breathe into your abdomen. That is the secret of the Japanese wrestlers.' To be a Japanese wrestler was not one of my ambitions, but I breathed into my abdomen for two or three days, and I must say in fairness that I felt no worse than if I had breathed into my chest. Another advocate of abdominal breathing wrote a book at the time in which he said—I quote from memory: 'Take a deep

breath into the abdomen, stroking your solar plexus the while with a circular motion and repeating the Lord's Prayer. If you have any objection to the Lord's Prayer, a few verses from Omar Khayyám will do as well.' The guardsman's chest, once admired, had fallen into disrepute, and the abdominalists began to speak contemptuously of 'pigeon-breasted athletes.'

Then came another expert who seemed to believe that half the ills of our race could be prevented or cured if we all breathed 'as if we were smelling a flower.' This method of breathing, indeed, was taught in a number of schools before the war. We were told at the time:

'In country schools real flowers are used for the exercises, but London elementary school children have to pretend they have flowers in their hands.

'Marigolds, pinks, and lilies of the valley are the flowers chosen. The children are taught to breathe in their scent in different ways, pretending that they like the last flower best.

'Thus they inhale the scent of the first two in short "sniffs," then exhale. But when smelling the lilies of the valley they breathe "in and out" rhythmically.'

This charming make-believe, it was maintained, improved not only the health of the children, but their speech.

If breathing the right way produces all the good results claimed for it, it seems to me that there ought to be a Minister of Breathing in the Cabinet. Lord Beaverbrook as head of such a ministry might well inaugurate a national breathing campaign that would set every occupant of a seat in a bus puffing like a grampus. Prizes might be given for great breathing feats like that of the man who could hold his breath while shaving, peeling a potato and eating it, and drinking wine. The record time for holding the breath, which is American, is said to be fourteen minutes two seconds. Equally to be wondered at is expertness in

blowing. The thoroughly efficient blower, an authority tells us, should be able to make a piece of paper hung by a thread in a doorway move backwards and forwards at a distance of about eight feet. In fact, there are so many things that can be accomplished by the manipulation of the breath that, if you made them your object in life, you would have hardly any time left in which to live. Almost the only thing you cannot do by means of breathing exercises is to commit suicide. 'Many,' we are told, 'have tried in vain to commit suicide by holding their breath.'

Even with a few nails in your skull, on the other hand, if you go on breathing, either in or out, you may go on living almost for ever. I certainly feel inclined to intend to try Captain Knowles's apical breathing—as a beginning—on my next birthday.





## II. UN-ENGLISH

NOTHING better in the way of comic drama in real life has been produced for some time than the scene recently reported in the *New Statesman and Nation*, in which we were told of the trial of a number of Dutch sailors who, after arriving in Belfast, went to a dance hall in York Street, became drunk, and were arrested on a charge of disorderly behaviour—which took the form not only of fighting but of biting people. The captain of the Dutch ship came forward to interpret the evidence given by his men, and at the end of the trial the magistrate addressed him gravely and said: ‘It is very un-English to bite people, and I would like you to impress it on your men.’ To which the Dutch captain replied, equally gravely: ‘It is very un-Dutch, too, your worship.’ That, I think, is one of the great retorts of history.

I confess, when I read the story, my first feeling was that the magistrate, remembering the proud province to which he belonged, ought to have said to the Dutch captain: ‘It is very un-Northern-Irish to bite people.’ After all, we all like to boast about the virtues of our native soil, and Northern Ireland—the home of Patrick Murphy, of County Down, and his V.C. lifeboat—is no more a part of England than the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. A moment’s reflection, however, told me that England was the only

unit in these islands in which bad conduct is reprobated in a local adjective beginning with 'un.' Even the most ardent Welsh patriot would never think of telling a foreigner that 'It is very un-Welsh to bite people.' I asked a Scotchman whether he had ever heard any one using the adjective 'un-Scotch'; and he said he could not imagine it except in reference to Irish whisky.

For a time I wondered whether the English were the only people who had ever used the prefix 'un' before their national designation to register their disapproval of something or other. I remembered vaguely from my school days that the Greeks used to call foreigners 'barbarians,' but I could not remember any instance of their having condemned any practice as 'un-Athenian,' 'un-Spartan,' or 'un-Macedonian.' Nor through the centuries could I find a trace of any incident in which the misbehaviour of some drunken sailor had been described with racial pride as 'un-Visigothic' or 'un-Ostrogothic.' America has left us no record of an enemy of the Palefaces who described some unpleasant white man's practice as 'un-Red-Indian.' Were the English, then, the only race that ever condemned habits they disliked by epithets formed on the model of 'un-English,' and, if so, when did they begin to use this boastful adjective? Did Englishmen in Shakespeare's day, for example, say to themselves with pride that 'it is very un-English to bite people,' taking for granted that all foreigners bit people? Or did the adjective 'un-English' come in about the same time as the phrase: 'It isn't cricket'?

I could scarcely believe that it was older than the Victorian era and the now-withered white flower of a blameless life. Turning to the *New English Dictionary*, however, I discovered to my surprise that the use of the word 'un-English' is as old as 1633 when Prynne—wasn't it he who lost his ears?—wrote: 'So unmanly, degenerous, and un-

English (if I may so speak) in their whole conversation.' There has been, I fear, a great deal of conversation since then that Prynne would have described as un-English. The next reference to the word comes from Horace Walpole who wrote in 1743: 'This is so un-English, or so un-heroic, that I despair of you!' That has the smack of the modern usage. Then we find the word used in a more restricted sense by a writer who in 1848 commented on the secret ballot in the despondent sentence: 'The un-English practice of secret voting will be resorted to.' No doubt to a good Tory every innovation has at first seemed un-English—income tax, health insurance, and all the rest of it. The *New English Dictionary*, unfortunately, gives us no examples of the use of the word 'un-English' after 1872, when someone wrote of 'a false patriotism that thought it un-English to wear foreign fabrics.'

Lest you should think, however, that the English are the only people who believe that everything right is a home product and that everything wrong is something done or produced by foreigners, it would be well for you to take note of the fact that the dictionary also contains the adjective 'un-American.' Even under the early date, 1818, we have the entry: 'Ninety marble capitals have been imported at vast cost from Italy . . . and show how un-American is the whole plan.' One would like to know the context of this, as of the next entry (from the *Daily News*, in 1894): 'However it came about, it is un-American and should be repudiated by the people.' There we see the perfect use of the 'un' adjective which should suggest that anything not practised by one's own people is wrong.

I have been told by an expert in language that all nations have this method of depreciating the customs of foreigners, but I can find little evidence of this in the dictionary. The word un-Irish appears, it is true, but only in such sentences as 'The youth endeavoured to become un-Irish in everything,'

'An awkward effort at enjoyment and amusement, un-Irish and lamentable in the extreme,' and (adverbially) 'They wisely and un-Irishly chose the money.'

This last sentence, by the way, is as modest as it is boastful.

On the whole, however, it must be admitted that, when nations describe something as uncharacteristic of themselves, they do so with a boastful implication. When an Englishman tells you that it is un-English to boast, is he not boasting that he alone among civilized men is guiltless of the sin of boasting? When he tells you that it is un-English to hit a man when he is down, is he not announcing his superiority to foreigners among whom hitting a man when he is down is the common practice? Similarly, if he says that it is un-English to strike a woman, he suggests that only in this other Eden, demi-Paradise, is wife-beating looked on as a vice. I wish someone would compile a complete list of the things that are un-English. They would include, I fancy, besides those I have mentioned, lying, bearing malice, hitting below the belt, kicking, and all forms of unsportsmanlike behaviour.

To me it seems that this indirect boastfulness has its uses. Not only does it assert the superiority of the chosen people—and every people is a chosen people in its own eyes—but it proclaims a code of behaviour below which none of its citizens should fall. Men cannot live without some code or other, and even the code implied in the phrase, 'It isn't cricket,' is better than no code at all. Hence I think that the more crimes, vices, and unpleasant forms of conduct are catalogued as un-English, the better it will be for England. If every Englishman could be persuaded, for example, that it was un-English to steal or to profiteer, or to enter the black market, what a sunburst of honesty would suddenly illuminate the country! But no one ever says even that 'it is un-English to wangle.' A common phrase about



the wangler is, indeed: 'You can't blame him, can you?' Yet it is vastly more important to discourage Englishmen from wangling extra rations in wartime than to discourage them from biting people. After all, how many Englishmen since their nursery days have fixed their teeth in the flesh of a fellow human being? I have never met a grown-up Englishman who bit people. Or, for that matter, a grown-up Frenchman, or a grown-up Italian, or a grown-up Japanese.

In most countries, I feel pretty sure, biting people is the hobby only of the few. The fact that one lives in a country in which people do not bite people seems to me scarcely worth boasting about. To use the vainglorious adjective 'un-English' as a description of such abstinence is surely a waste of a good word.

Still, however it may be used, the adjective 'un-English' does express an ideal. It is no small achievement to have made 'un-English' a synonym for (according to the dictionary definition) 'not straightforward; unfair; unsportsmanlike.' Foreigners may not be impressed, but the word may help to keep Englishmen up to the mark. Human beings perhaps need to praise themselves in order to make themselves worthy of their praise. Let a people begin to boast of its virtues, and it may end by practising them. That may account for the almost complete disappearance of the inhuman custom of biting people, not only in Great Britain and Northern Ireland but, as we now know, in Holland, too.



### III. WINDOW VIEW

I WAS sitting on the top of a London bus the other day when a man and his wife took the opposite seat and placed a small daughter on her feet where she could look out of the window and see what a fine place the world is. There are, I am sure, few more memorable pleasures than that of looking out of a window. The window of a nursery, the window of a tram or bus, the window of a train—who was ever bored by the spectacle to be seen from any of them? Snow or heavy rain seen through a window brings the child to the frontier of an enchanted country. Snowflakes fall with a leisurely beauty and thickness never to be seen again till one possesses one of those globes that when shaken produce a miniature snowstorm. Every drop of rain that takes its irregular course down the glass is followed with excitement. No vehicle that passes but is as interesting as part of a circus; the milkman's cart, the chemist's cart, the baker's cart, the cart from which water used to be sold immune from the germs of typhoid fever—what a procession things of the kind have been ever since windows were invented! The neighbours who passed might seem to an older eye to be ordinary people; but, seen from the

inside of the window, each of them, with his handsome port or gouty limp, with her goddess-like profile or raddled cheeks and heavy clothes, had the personality of a character of Dickens. No child bowling a hoop or spinning a top was too insignificant to be a worthy participant in the panorama that could be seen from a window in the top storey of the house—the panorama of life in the narrow circle of one's universe.

As I watched the little girl on the top of the bus, I could not help regretting that we who are older have so thoughtlessly abandoned such pleasures. The child was manifestly travelling through a wonderland. Every time we passed a bomb-battered building or a gash in a terrace where a building had once been she cried out with delight: 'Mummy, mummy, look! Damage, damage!' And with each ruined building her interest in the world seen through a window appeared to grow. 'Look, mummy, look!' she would cry as we passed the skeleton of a Victorian warehouse. 'Damage! Damage! DAMAGE!' Her voice rose from italics to small capitals, and from small capitals to large, in an ecstasy of spectatorial appreciation. Her vocabulary was small, but never have I heard so few words express more angelic happiness. Nothing would have pleased her better, I am sure, than if Westminster Abbey and Saint Paul's had been razed to the ground and she had been privileged to stand on the top of a bus and catch a glimpse of the ruins through a window.

To a psychologist this might suggest that the little girl had in her the germs of sadism. The child, we are sometimes told, is a natural destroyer—a creature that enjoys knocking down the palaces of wooden bricks carefully erected by a more creative junior, tearing pages out of precious books, pulling a clock to pieces, or ruining the happiness of a purring cat by tugging at its tail. And I admit that the lust for destruction is probably as widespread

as the lust for creation—perhaps even more so. To throw stones at a bottle till the bottle is broken has been one of the miniature pleasures of life since the beginning of bottles. There was always a certain satisfaction to be had from throwing a stone through the window of a street lamp. One of the pleasantest evenings of my childhood was spent with other small boys in playing hockey with a clergyman's armoury of croquet mallets till not a mallet was left whole. No croquet mallet was ever made that could withstand the fierce impacts of hockey, and, as one mallet after another was smashed in twain, our joy was unconfined. I have even known a child who enjoyed killing flies. But I doubt whether the little girl who rejoiced in the spectacle of damaged London had this vice of destructiveness. She was simply, it seemed to me, a small creature going round the picture-gallery of the world and making exclamations of delight at everything worth looking at that she saw.

After all, we older people in our love of sights cannot claim any moral superiority to her. How pleasant it is to be shown over a church where Cromwell's men once knocked off the noses of, or otherwise mutilated, the figures on the tombs! To be interested in such things does not imply agreement with Cromwell's men; but, if Cromwell's men did such things, we like to see the effects of the things they did. In the same spirit, we go to the Colosseum in Rome—a spirit of curiosity rather than of reprobation of the emperors who for their amusement once had Christians thrown to lions in that abominable arena. We do not approve of the emperors: in fact, we are shocked by them; but we feel that an hour or so may be profitably spent in visiting the scene of such atrocious happenings. If our imaginations were more sensitive, and if the past were as real to us as the present, we should feel such a passion of hatred in the shadow of the Colosseum walls as the Covenanters felt by the gravesides of their martyrs,

but the past is seldom wholly real to us. Mr. Shaw makes us laugh in *Androcles*—not without touching our hearts—at Rome of the uneven fights between the Christians and the lions. Yet Mr. Shaw is more sensitive than most of us. As for the rest of us, we tolerate the intolerable Bluebeard as a figure in a nursery fairy-tale, and all through our lives are inclined to treat Henry VIII as a comic character. This does not mean that with half our hearts we sympathize with the vices of monsters. It means simply that our imaginations are so restricted that we can scarcely realize what crime and horror are till they reach our own doorstep.

It is a debatable question whether the limited responsiveness of the imagination is to be deplored or to be accepted as an essential of sane existence. If our imaginations could comprehend all the cruelties of life, from the days of Cain to the time of Torquemada, and from Torquemada's to our own incomparable date, how could we live either so pleasantly or so efficiently? There is a mercy in nature which blinds us to too much realization of horrors outside our own radius. The people who run to see a fire have not the same emotions as the man whose house is on fire. They are rubbernecks in comparison with a sufferer. Perhaps it is as well.

Even in regard to our own experiences, memory provides us with a kind of window through which we can enjoy looking at many things in the past that at the time of their occurrence were not enjoyable. The first Latin sentence that was ever taught me by my elders was the Virgilian 'Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit'; and I have often thought that it proved Aeneas to be no mean psychologist. Our early terrors as we approached the dentist's chair—how insupportable they would be if they remained as acute in retrospect as they were at the moment when the butcher with the forceps bent down over our helpless faces! I speak of a distant age when dentists were not artists and

there was no analgesic needle to secure us against the pangs of a molar bloodily torn out by the roots. As a reminiscence, however, a bygone experience in the dentist's chair is mainly amusing.

Twice I was nearly drowned, and, though the thing happened on each occasion too suddenly to be as terrifying as I should have expected, it was unpleasant: yet, in memory, my all-but-drowning has become something agreeably seen through a window. I should not now like to have missed those experiences that had no sugar of happiness in them. I met a man recently who told me that when he was driving a tractor one day during a thunderstorm, the machine was struck by lightning that swept along his arms and tore the hair off his forearms before disappearing into the earth; and, though he said: 'Whenever a thunderstorm's coming on, ever since then, I feel my stomach turning over and over,' yet, as there was no thunderstorm in the air as he talked, his face was bright with enjoyment, almost boastful enjoyment, of a terror no longer present. To be as sharply aware of the past as of present pain is to be in danger of becoming embittered and neurotic. Dickens remembered much of his childhood with humiliation, but, even so, he looked through a window on a world that was much more laughable than it can have seemed at the time when he was living in it. Grievances and humiliations survive, but, except occasionally, they are mitigated by time.

The past has become in part a spectacle and, forgetting much, we can see it at times more or less in the same spirit in which the little girl cried out: 'Look, mummy, look! Damage, damage, damage!' Whatever else it may have been, it has at least become, so far as we are concerned, enormously, topsyturvily interesting.



#### IV. NO INTELLECTUALS

It has often been maintained that the English distrust the intellect. We used to be told that in France, Germany, and various other countries, intellect was respected even by those who had almost no intellects. England, on the other hand, was depicted as a land in which fox-hunting squires and rich men created the national ideal; and obviously it does not require an abnormal amount of brains to ride in pursuit of a fox or to grow rich.

I have often wondered whether this picture of the comparative intellectuality of foreigners was ever true. Has there ever been a nation in which great universities have been more generally honoured than in England? Is there any other nation in which a boat-race between the scholars of two rival universities has become a national event, as exciting almost as Derby Day or a test match? Is there any other country in which a school tie has become such a world-wide symbol—until recently—of everything necessary to the perfection of human life?

No. England has never despised her universities and schools. If she has earned a name for indifference to the

intellect, this is largely due to her excessive modesty. During the nineteenth century in particular, while carrying on with her boat-races, she took it for granted that the Germans were her superiors in philosophy and scholarship. The Germans were represented by many people as a nation of bespectacled pipe-smokers who loved nothing better than to pass an evening discussing Kant, Hegel, and Fichte. As for scholarship, a German had only to blue-pencil half a masterpiece of a Greek or Roman author as spurious in order to be hailed as a scholar of genius. I remember, when I was reading Thucydides, being told to mark clause after clause as dubious because some eminent German scholar—was his name Christ?—had pronounced it so. Theology, in the same way, was largely foreign; and the house in which I lived was filled with translations of four-volume German books on this or that aspect of Christianity and on the question who had not written what in various books of the New Testament. Germany was the land of intellectual light—a lantern of scholarship burning in mid-Europe.

I do not wish to suggest that the high opinions men then had of Germany as a land of philosophy and scholars was mistaken. Being neither a philosopher nor a scholar, I am not competent to say whether Germany was or was not supreme in these intellectual fields as in music. I wonder, however, whether reverence of the intellect was ever so common in Germany or so rare in England as was then generally supposed. I remember many years ago a man who had been educated at a German university telling me that, while he was there, he used to attend a working-men's debating society, and that it would be impossible anywhere in England to find a group of working men capable of such intelligent discussion. To him the ordinary German seemed to be more interested in the things of the mind, whereas his English counterpart was interested mainly in



horse-racing and public-house gossip. He gave one the impression that Germans were nearly all intellectuals, and that the English were in comparison a people who hated using their brains as a sluggard hates using his muscles.

That the Germans were not very long ago the best-educated people in Europe is possibly true. But how odd it is that within less than two generations their country should have become the chief centre of hostility to the intellectual life! It is common enough in England to hear denunciations of 'highbrows' and 'intellectuals'; but how odd such a thing seems in the land of Goethe! Perhaps it is a reaction from a surfeit of learning. Whatever may be the explanation, Germany seems to have come round to the opinion of the fox-hunters, and to regard the intellect as something unworthy of the great Nordic race.

'National Socialism wants no intellectuals,' said a Nazi in Holland the other day in an address to students of Utrecht University. I wonder whether English undergraduates at the outset of their careers were ever warned against the use of their brains in this fashion. Retired colonels at school prize-givings have sometimes boasted that, when they were at school, they never did a stroke of work, and were always, so to speak, at the bottom of the class; and in this way they have given the impression that prize-winners who used their mental muscles were a kind of sneaking creatures not in the best English tradition. At the same time Englishmen in their hearts respect a double first almost as much as they respect a blue. The popularity of a B.B.C. feature entitled the Brains Trust is evidence of the English reverence for the intellect. To a nation that was indifferent to the things of the mind a turn with such a name would have been anathema.

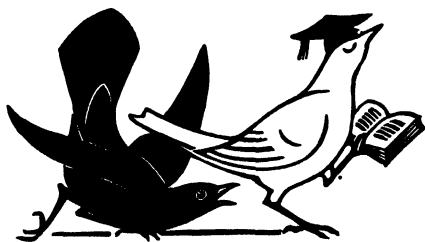
And, indeed, even those who use the word 'intellectual' as a term of reprobation do not as a rule mean to express dislike of the intelligence. I do not know when the noun

was first used in a disparaging sense: a hurried look through the *New English Dictionary* throws no light on the subject. But I imagine that the custom of looking on intellectuals as a special class, as well as the custom of mocking them, came from abroad. We used to hear of the intelligentsia of Russia, and many Russians laughed at them as talkers without the virtue of action. Others, listening to them, regarded them as the not-very-intelligentsia, and denied that even their words had wisdom. On the whole, however, I imagine that the chief accusation against those who are now called intellectuals has in most ages been a certain pretentiousness and pharisaical self-satisfaction. The typical intellectual is, rightly or wrongly, supposed to be in his own eyes a superior person because he reads books that ordinary men and women cannot read, and admires pictures that ordinary men and women cannot make head or tail of. The ordinary man, on the other hand, has a way of persuading himself that everybody who enjoys books and pictures that are Greek to him is an impostor. Readers of the later Browning and the later Henry James were at one time suspected of being merely humbugs. And, undoubtedly, some of them were. Fashion influences literary taste as it influences costume; and many people naturally feel happier if they are in the fashion. To like the right authors is as important to them as to leave the lowest waistcoat button undone when this is the right thing to do. But why a fashionably read man should be regarded as more of a humbug than a fashionably dressed man it is not easy to explain. Perhaps the reason is that the fashionably read man among the intellectuals is always in a minority and so belongs to a sect opposed to the tastes of the community, whereas the fashionably dressed man is a yes-man from his heels to his hat.

In England the intellectual nowadays is usually called a highbrow, and seldom is the word 'highbrow' used as a

term of praise. The ordinary man, however, in attacking highbrows is merely defending himself from his lower-browed tastes. He feels as superior for not liking Bach as he believes the highbrow feels for liking Bach. His resentment of highbrows is perhaps a mark of his love of equality, and he will not have it that a man who can read *Paradise Lost* or *Finnegan's Wake* with enjoyment is on that account a better man than he.

The English objection to the intellectual seems always to have been that he is not an ordinary human being—that he is a freak, a conceited white blackbird. The German objection seems to be rather that he is a recalcitrant citizen who cannot be made to goose-step in time with the mass of obedient citizens. He is a heretic, not so much in his artistic opinions as in his politics. That is the suspected danger in a country in which every minority is regarded as a menace. The odd thing is that, just as the intellectuals are being suppressed in Germany, they have begun to flourish in England as they have never flourished before. If the late Henry James were writing to-day, his books would probably be selling not in hundreds but in tens of thousands. One could almost believe, indeed, that England is becoming a land of intellectuals if one never went to the cinema.





## V. A LETTER

Two of the never-failing pleasures of life are hearing from people and listening to people. The pleasure of hearing from people is slightly mitigated by the, I suppose, natural desire on the part of most correspondents to hear from one in return. Not to write a letter in answer to a letter is regarded by them as a piece of bad manners comparable to the behaviour of a man who listens to a five-minute monologue from a well-wisher on the telephone and deliberately puts back the receiver without having said a word in reply. This is obviously a misinterpretation of the attitude of the non-letter writer. There are some people who enjoy writing letters, and other people who are happier not answering them; and, as each of the parties is doing what it likes best, neither of them can claim superiority, on ground of morals or courtesy, over the other. I, for example, happen to be a letter-reader, not a letter-writer, but that does not mean that I condemn the habit of letter-writing as it is indulged in by those who are addicted to it. On the contrary, I can enjoy reading almost any letter; and envy, instead of censuring, the energy of the correspondent who wrote it.

Looking through my pockets in search of a cheque the other day, I came on a number of letters that seemed to me to have been well worth writing. There was one in particular, a few weeks old—criticizing a defence I had made of Englishmen in the matter of their respect for the intellect—which I thought fully justified a twopence-halfpenny stamp. Rather hastily, perhaps, I had written the sentence:

‘Has there ever before been a nation in which a university boat-race has become a national event, exciting almost as much interest as Derby Day or a test match?’

To me in my innocence the popularity of the university boat race seemed to be evidence of an ineradicable veneration on the part of the English people for their oldest seats of learning. What other explanation can there be of the fact that a million English men, women, and children will not turn out to see a boat-race rowed between any two crews of which all the members are not scholars in the tradition of William of Wykeham and Porson?

I did not perceive the flaw in this reasoning till a letter reached me in which a correspondent rather satirically remarked:

‘So, to prove how brainy we are, Y.Y. cites as evidence the University Boat Race! I suppose, if a book-publishing house ran a football team, and it acquired great prestige, Y.Y. would argue from this that the English were a very literary race.’

As a matter of fact I should, had I not been led to reconsider the matter by the letter from which I have quoted. If I had seen seventy thousand spectators shouting themselves hoarse at Twickenham as a Faber and Faber XV battled furiously with a Gollancz XV, or as the Macmillans fought the Heinemanns to a scoreless draw, I should have said to myself: ‘How English people love books!’ I have unfortunately little comprehension of logic, for, though I

attended logic lectures for a year, the youth beside me always sat with a photograph of Marie Studholme in front of him, and by his not always mute admiration of her distracted my attention from barbara celarent and major and minor premisses. Therefore I still find it extremely difficult to perceive the flaw in one of my own arguments. Even after reading the comments of my critic, I can only half see that there is something wrong with my reasoning in believing that, if the Faber-and-Fabers and the Gollanczes drew large Rugby crowds to Twickenham, this would show that England was becoming literary.

I bow to my critic, however, who has a more logical mind than I; and I have no doubt that he is right in deriding my other 'proof' of the intellectualism of the English people as I presented it in the sentence: 'Is there any other country in which a school tie has become such a world-wide symbol—until recently—of everything necessary to the perfection of human life?' To me this argument for the Englishman's love of scholarship seemed, when I wrote it, unanswerable. My more logically minded critic, however, suggests that there is no foundation for my reasoning, and that the common devotion to the old school tie has noting whatever to do with love of scholarship. He writes:

'Really; on first reading the article, I had grave doubts at this point, as to whether or not it was supposed to be a satire. But no; the seriousness of the beginning is maintained throughout. Y.Y.'s remarks on the old school tie suggest that he wears one himself, and talks only to other wearers. His language is as blindly self-praising as when a Chinese mandarin says: "We are the celestial people; all others are devils!"

'Surely such extravagant claims were never before made for any one institution. This school tie is the symbol

not merely of intellect, but "of everything necessary to the perfection of human life"!

'Of course we are meant by that to infer that the freemasonry between the public-school class is one of intellect; whereas it does not need much reflection to decide that this bond is purely one of similar social caste and training.'

Strange though it may seem to my critic, I had never thought of this last explanation of the passion for the old school tie. Many years ago I used occasionally to meet an Old Carthusian in a public-house and, though it may sound difficult to believe, he never once mentioned social caste. His talk, in fact, was scholarly, and full of Latin sentences. Every now and then he would say: 'Nunc est bibendum'; and, as he shook hands at closing time, he would observe, a little meaninglessly: 'Cras ingens iterabimus aequor.' But never once during our years of acquaintance did he even hint a question about my social position or the school at which I had been more or less educated. He might occasionally make a reference to T. E. Page and his dazzling trousers, or evince a pardonable pride in having attended the same school as Max Beerbohm; but, on the whole, apart from his incursions into Latin, his talk was like anybody else's, though he took a special delight in repeating that memorable question from *The Wrong Box*: 'Do you know what the Governor of South Carolina said to the Governor of North Carolina? "It's a long time between drinks."' Even this habit of quotation from a masterpiece might, I think, have justified one in describing him as an intellectual rather than as a man too conscious of his social caste.

Possibly, however, not all Old Carthusians are like my scholarly acquaintance. Some of them may have forgotten their Latin and their Stevenson. Others may have sunk into the snobbery which my critic has detected in so many wearers of the old school tie. My only excuse for being

wrong is that my field of observation has been limited and that I am not so acute an observer as I might be. Also that I use words loosely in a way that must offend any one with a precise and logical mind.

I became especially aware of this failing, as I read further in my critic's letter:

'But Y.Y. is not quite finished with the boat race. He returns to the subject with the assertion that we "respect a 'Double First' almost as much as a 'Blue.'"

'Almost! The champion of the intellectuals sets out to confound the foreigners; and hands them their own argument on a plate! Surely the only way to prove his case would be to assert that the "Blue" was held in respect, but that the highest veneration was reserved for the "Double First"?'

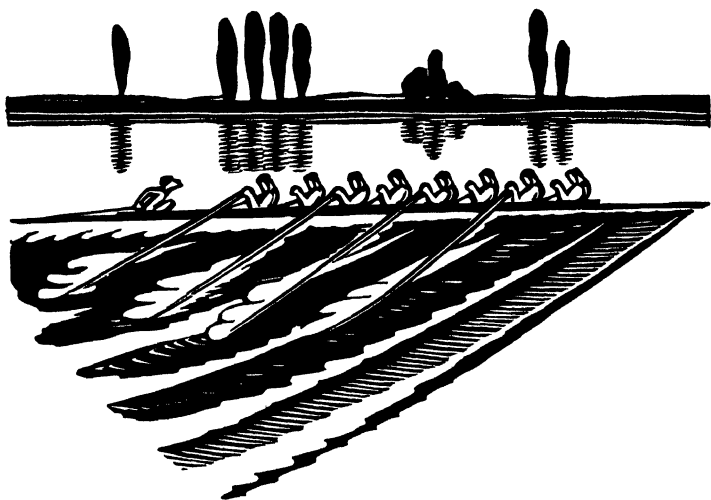
There, I must admit, my critic is right. To establish the case for the Englishman's enthusiasm for the intellect, I ought to have said boldly that 'the Blue was held in respect, but that the highest veneration was reserved for the Double First.' But would this have been quite true? It would have been a powerful argument, but, even in defence of English intellectualism, I shrink from saying things of the truth of which I am uncertain. And I still doubt whether a Double First is as popular as a Blue. I have certainly never seen thirty or forty thousand people rising to their feet with their hats off and yelling in celebration of a Double First.

Hence, as one who always plays for safety, I think it may be better to take the reverence for the Blue rather than the veneration of the Double First as the eminent proof of the intellectual leanings of the English people.

Even so, I wilt slightly as I read and re-read my critic's closing sentence: 'This champion of the intellectuals must not expect to be thanked by those whom he has undertaken to defend.' Not that I expected to be thanked, for I have



long known that this is an ungrateful world. At the same time, I feel that my defence of the intellect might have been made more convincing, and that I may have ever so slightly overestimated the significance of Twickenham and the Thames as the modern echoes and reflections of the Athens of Socrates.





## VI. WIND UP

I CANNOT remember any year in which the wind has blown more irritatingly than in this. We have had sunny weather and wet weather, but, whatever the weather has been, it has been accompanied by a wind that has destroyed the pleasures of sunshine and doubled the displeasures of rain. 'The wind 's all wrong this year,' a countrywoman said the other day. 'You get cold winds from the south-west, and warm winds from the north-east. Do you think the war can have anything to do with it?' I myself, who am both by age and by temperament a deck-chair man, have become more and more conscious of this perversity of the weather. We are now in the eighth month of the year; but only on a few days before the present week have I been able to sit in the garden in the morning in my pyjamas and dressing gown and feel at ease in the fresh air of heaven as I read the morning papers. Almost always there has been a nagging half-gale from some point of the compass. The world has been fuller of draughts than I have ever previously known it, and again and again, even on beautiful-looking spring days, I have been driven indoors to the refuge of an arm-chair.

Yet I have always thought of myself as a wind-lover—or,

at least, a wind-liker. I remember how when I first read a line in a poem by W. B. Yeats:

I became a man, a hater of the wind,

I wondered what he could mean by it. From childhood most of us have had a natural affection for the wind. The wind that whips the sea into a surf and drives the foam yards beyond its wont up the sands is one of our earliest architects of awe and delight. To battle against the wind is for infancy an exhilaration. To hear the wind moaning in the chimney is to experience the terrifying happiness of listening to a ghost story in which one almost believes. How often as a child have I been brought downstairs in the midnight hours during a great gale lest the chimney should fall through the roof and crush us in our beds! And how pleasure was blended with fear as we sat up and listened to the batterings of the storm at those normally unpermitted hours! Fear and pleasure are curiously intertwined in a good deal of human happiness, and in nothing more than in the happiness we sometimes experience in a storm.

In spite of my early late-sittings during gales, however, I have never really longed for storms. If I were crossing the English Channel to-day—or rather if I were crossing it in peacetime—I should hope for a sea as smooth as a sheet of ice. To sit on deck and be borne through still blue waters with no climbing waves to disturb the serenity of the most thalassophobic passenger—is not that, with the accompaniment of crying gulls, the perfection of sea travel? And yet in retrospect can one honestly say that one has ever regretted a stormy passage? One's vanity rises as one reads in the papers, the day after, that, according to the captain of the boat, the gale that one has survived was the worst he has known for twenty years. I myself will never cease to regret that, on my only trip to and from the New World, the Atlantic billows never rose higher than the waves at Brighton. I did not wish for storms at

the time, but, looking back, I wish I had been through an Atlantic gale. I should like to have been an actor in a past in which a storm-tossed ship beat its way up watery mountain sides and down into the trough beyond. I do not wholeheartedly enjoy storms at sea, but I enjoy having been through storms at sea.

Even during a storm at sea, however, there are compensations for one's nervousness. The bumping and thumping of the ship through night waters swirled into whiteness by the tempest excite some glands in the body not only to terror but to enjoyment. The lack of sea-legs is an embarrassment; but, holding on to a post, one is a spectator of one of the world's wonders. One can understand how Turner had himself lashed to a mast during a gale at sea in order that he might absorb to the full the monstrous beauties of wind and water in conflict.

Probably in regard to wind, there are two conflicting schools—the wind-lovers and the wind-haters. You will find specimens of both schools in almost every railway carriage. There are men so much in love with currents of air that they will open a window even on the iciest days of winter. There are others who will shut the window even on the sultriest days of summer. Human beings differ about draughts as bitterly as theologians once differed about what nowadays seem less important matters. The Frenchman fears a *courant d'air* as though it were a miasmatic evil. The athletic young Englishwoman drinks it in as though it were the elixir of life. And the sad thing is that there is no possibility of compromise on the matter. The draught-hater is a bigot—what is erroneously called a man of principle—who looks on even a chink of open window as the thin end of the wedge. I once knew a man who would not accept an invitation to a dinner-party in a restaurant until he had inspected the position of the table and made sure that no window in the neighbourhood would

be open. If he smelt or felt an inch of fresh air near the table, he shook his head and dined at home.

This seems to me a sign not only of physical, but of mental and moral, ill-health. Yet I have known strong men, wise men and good men who had this passionate hatred of air in circulation. Experiments prove that, if you keep a guinea-pig in stagnant air, its spirit flags and it becomes all but lifeless; and that, if you circulate the air, however foul it may be, the guinea-pig reawakens to normal activity. So far as I can see, however, human beings are not like guinea-pigs. The fresh-air haters flourish on stagnation. They peak and pine only in pure circumambulatory air. Some of those I have known, I cannot help thinking, would have regarded the Black Hole of Calcutta as a home from home.

Between the two extremes of the faintest draught and the fiercest gale there are enough varieties of wind to make observation of their comings and goings the hobby of a lifetime. In the early years of the nineteenth century Admiral Beaufort devised a scale for the measurement and nomenclature of winds, which ran as follows:

<i>Scale No.</i>	<i>Wind</i>						<i>Miles an Hour</i>
0	.	.	Calm	.	.	.	0
1	.	.	Light air.	.	.	.	3
2	.	.	Light breeze	.	.	.	13
3	.	.	Gentle breeze	.	.	.	18
4	.	.	Moderate breeze	.	.	.	23
5	.	.	Fresh breeze	.	.	.	28
6	.	.	Strong breeze	.	.	.	34
7	.	.	Moderate gale	.	.	.	40
8	.	.	Fresh gale	.	.	.	48
9	.	.	Strong gale	.	.	.	56
10	.	.	Whole gale	.	.	.	65
11	.	.	Storm	.	.	.	75
12	.	.	Hurricane	.	.	.	90

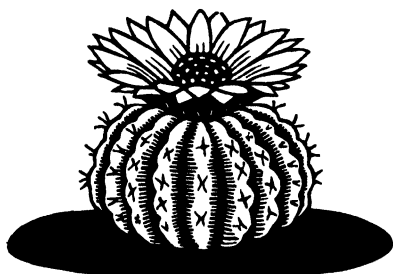
The scale, I believe, has been modernized since then; but Admiral Beaufort was the first to endow each wind with an individual value as unmistakable as that of an English stamp. I once met an old gentleman in a seaside hotel, who spent most of his holiday gazing into the wind and correcting his wife—who did her melancholy best to share his interests—if she mistook a strong breeze for a moderate gale. He loved his winds and would not have them misnamed. He could talk for an hour on the difference between a strong gale and a whole gale or between a storm and a hurricane. The hoisting of the storm signal on the flagstaff at the local coastguard station filled him with delight. 'We may have a hurricane yet,' he would shout enthusiastically through the tempest into which he had dragged me. Calm days had no interest for him. A calm day was to him a *dies non*.

Unlike Admiral Beaufort most people seem to label winds according to their direction rather than according to their mileage per hour. The ancients seem to have personified the chief winds of the compass under such directional names as Boreas and to have considered some of them inimical to life and health. In England proverbial wisdom has given the east wind a bad name. Some years ago a resident on the coast of Sussex wrote: 'Here the east wind is reckoned to take three days to blow up, three days to blow and three days to die away, and there is a saying that, especially in spring, it "leaves sickness behind it and brings pests in the garden."' Not every one will admit, however, that the general dislike of the east wind is justified. Sir Napier Shaw maintained some years ago that the villain among winds is not an east wind or a south wind but a 'katabatic' wind, and a 'katabatic' wind, we were told, is not a wind that blows from this or that point of the compass: it 'is one that blows, not horizontally like ordinary winds, but downwards from ice-topped mountains.' This wind, Sir Napier declared, is 'the bitterest

enemy of mankind.' As he puts it in more simple language: 'It causes discontinuity; and it nibbles the energy that causes the convection and produces the rain that accounts for the wind in the cyclonic house of the northern hemisphere.' That, no doubt, is the explanation of many a ruined summer holiday.

To me, however, the wind has always been a subject full of mystery. I do not know why a wind begins to blow, or why, having begun to blow, it ever stops. For me the wind bloweth when, where and why it listeth, and I cannot grasp the explanation of such facts as that 'in the northern hemisphere an observer who stands with his back to the wind will have lower pressure to his left than to his right. In the southern hemisphere the reverse holds.' The one thing about the wind that I really know is that I like it, as I like sunshine, in moderation. And who would wish to have the sun blazing for twenty-four hours a day? This year the wind seems to have blown twenty-four hours a day seven days a week month after month—an immoderate statement but impressionistically true. I long for a spell of Admiral Beaufort's calm. It would, I am sure, be good for the tomatoes, good for the runner beans, and good for me in my deck-chair.





## VII. FLORAL

YET another prohibition. Flower growers are now forbidden to use more than a quarter of their pre-war land for the cultivation of flowers. Food for the body must take the place of food for the eye, and the rose and the daffodil must make way for the swede and the potato. It is, perhaps, symbolical of our time that it is an age of the retrocession of flowers. No longer is it a virtue to mingle the useful and the pleasant. We are bound to the wheel of utility for some years to come.

War, so far as I have observed, has done nothing to diminish the civilized appetite for flowers. Even in recently bomb-battered streets you would often see a flower-shop window bright with colour, and, though love of confectionery and tobacco is more widespread and more urgent than the love of flowers, there was no lack of customers for violets, tulips, and carnations. Flowers had become so much a part of ordinary life that rooms looked bare without them. Hence the amateur gardener with a small patch of earth behind his house, when tempted by duty to grow tomatoes instead of lupins and columbines, stood out to an extraordinary degree against the temptation to sacrifice his flower beds and preferred dining without salads to dining without flowers.

This love of flowers might be put down as escapist, and it is certainly one of the chief means by which thousands



of men and women escape from the drabness of modern life. They do not mind living in an ugly villa if they have a pretty garden. They may care nothing for poetry or painting or music, but they are among the aesthetes at sight of anchusas and violas. And the love of flowers has this advantage over the love of the arts, that it leads to no quarrels of taste. The older and the younger generations differ on many matters, but not on the beauty of sweet peas. In regard only to a few flowers is there any hot division of opinion. One man may love, another hate, the yellow *calceolaria*. There are some to whom the cactus, loathed by many, is the flower of flowers. I myself have no great liking for the red-hot poker, or, if you prefer the botanical name, *Kniphofia aloides*; and I once met a man who spoke venomously of hollyhocks, which his wife loved. Still, the garden of to-day is changed curiously little from the garden of fifty years ago. The snowdrop and the crocus still open the year, and though there are new varieties of flowers, there are still the same flowers.

When, I wonder, did this love of garden flowers begin? So far as an ignoramus can discern, there are few signs of it in the Old Testament. The garden of Eden was a flowerless world. We are told that God said: 'Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit-tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself upon the earth,' but there is no mention of blooms such as we see in Sutton or Epsom gardens to-day. If it is true that it was with an apple that Eve tempted Adam, there must at one time of the year have been apple blossom; but scholars nowadays tell us that the forbidden fruit that led to the disobedience of our first parents was the tomato, and there are few duller flowers than the blossom of the tomato—the love-apple, as it is still said to be called among the heathen. There are no signs that the Israelites appreciated flowers till we come to the Psalms and the Song of

Solomon. And even the Psalms dwell less on the loveliness of the flowers than on their momentary life, which has been the theme of the poets for centuries. 'As for man, his days are as grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.' Yet that, to many of us, when we were children listening to the Bible being read, was one of the first intimations, not only of the impermanence, but of the exquisiteness of life. 'As a flower of the field, so he flourisheth.' When we heard the sentence read or sung at the funerals of our elders we knew that we, too, were part of a procession in which spring would pass on into dying autumn for ever and ever. The mood may not have lasted much after the funeral feast, but until then we were all in our imagination tragically short-lived flowers of the field.

How charming a break the Song of Solomon made in our services! Presbyterianism is supposed to be an austere creed, but what child, sitting in a Presbyterian church, ever missed the vision of a world in which his native place became a paradise as he listened to the sentences: 'I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys. As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.' I confess that to me they transformed the earth like Forbes-Robertson's enunciation of the great speeches of Hamlet. 'The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.' That still seems to me to be a good sentence. So was it when my life began, so is it now I am a man, and that is all there is to be said about it.

The New Testament, too, brought the same entrancing light into the old church, built in imitation of a Greek temple, with the sunshine reaching us through modern stained-glass windows containing images of Calvin and John Knox. Or was one of them Henry Cooke? 'Con-

sider the lilies of the field; they toil not, neither do they spin; and yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.' Is there a lovelier sentence in literature? Joseph Chamberlain in his Radical days rather vulgarized it by the suggestion that 'They toil not, neither do they spin' was a description not only of the lilies but of the idle rich. But we did not read politics into the sentence then, and we do not read politics into it now. The words still awake the imagination to the spectacle of an efflorescent springtime earth.

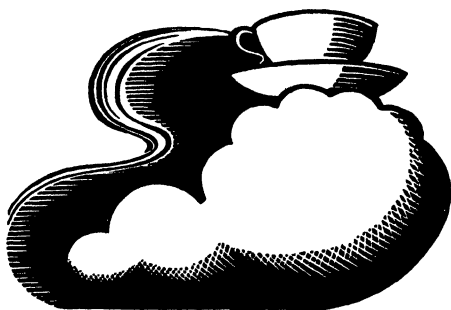
Even so, one never gets the impression that the Christian world was a garden as the pagan world of the Greeks was. I am not a scholar, but ever since I was at school I have thought of the Greek world as a place luxuriant with hyacinths, irises, violets, and mallows. And when I dipped into the Loeb translation of the *Deipnosophists* the other day, I found my memories confirmed. Page after page is filled with descriptions of flowers proper to be worn in wreaths at banquets—'the crocus closing in the springtime, henna, too, and bergamot-mint with pungent smell, and all the beauties which a meadow wears without cultivation in hollow watered places, ox-eye and fragrant pink, chrysanthemums and hyacinth withal, and dark violets close to the ground, which Persephone loathed amongst flowers.' What a strange light this throws on the tastes of Persephone! How different from Perdita's!

The Greeks, however, unlike the English, seem never to have loved beauty for beauty's sake. They thought that it should be associated with the true or the good or even the useful. We can observe how utilitarian was their love of flowers as we read the advice of one of their physicians as to the flowers of which wreaths should be composed at banquets. This physician, Andreas, urged his fellow citizens to remember that one of the original purposes of wearing wreaths was 'to aid them against the disadvantages

of drunkenness'; and he went on: 'And so a myrtle wreath which is astringent can dispel the fumes of wine; or again a wreath of roses, which has a sedative power against headache, and is to a certain extent cooling. . . . But a wreath of gillyflowers, which excite the nerves of the head, or one of marjoram—in fact all those that are capable of stupefying, or otherwise oppressing, the head, must be avoided.'

It is impossible to imagine such sentences being written in modern England. There was a famous Victorian song called *She wore a Wreath of Roses*, and it would certainly never have won its place in the concert hall and the drawing-room if the 'she' to whom it referred had been a lady who wore her wreath as a preventive of a drunken headache or because roses are 'to a certain extent cooling.' I have a number of friends who wear roses in their buttonholes, but I have never suspected them of doing so in the hope of mitigating the effects of a carousal.

I am sorry to see that the Americans are just now imitating the Greeks rather than the English in their attitude to flowers. I read the other day a paragraph about flowers which had the heading: 'Be beautiful, and so help to beat Hitler,' and learned that a New York flower-shop has a sign in its window: 'Morale brings victory—flowers build morale.' Such considerations seem to me to be totally irrelevant. This wearing of posies in order to beat Hitler or strengthen one's morale may be in the Greek tradition, but modern man should have got beyond this and have learned to enjoy flowers merely for their colours, their perfumes, and their names. The poets at their greatest have never asked of a flower more than it should be beautiful, and neither does the little man with a garden in Tooting Bec. Flowers are as useless as the moon and as all the stars except one, and their uselessness is one of the elements of their glory.



### VIII. IN AND OUT OF BED

I WAS lately a patient in a nursing home in which every bedroom was called by the name of a saint and had a saint's name painted on the door. As a result of this custom the nurses commonly refer to a patient, not by his own name, but as 'Saint Francis' or 'Saint Theresa,' or whatever may be the name of the room he occupies. Thus one morning, when I had left my morning tea to get cold, I heard my nurse calling to another nurse on the landing: 'Sister, when you're taking a cup of tea to Saint Paul you might bring one to Mr. Y.' For some reason the notion of Saint Paul and myself having morning tea more or less together raised my spirits to such a point that I at once took a turn for the better. I have never shared the modern prejudice against Saint Paul—a prejudice for which, I imagine, Matthew Arnold is largely responsible in this country. I certainly felt happier taking a cup of tea with him than I should have felt taking a cup of tea with Saint Augustine. I, I may say, was known in the nursing home for purposes of reference as Saint Mary. Myself I was a heretic in those severely Franciscan surroundings. When first I was taken out of the ambulance stretcher and deposited in bed and a nun, coming in to fill in a kind of census form about my age and

other peculiarities, had reached the question 'Religion?' I answered diffidently: 'My father was a Presbyterian.' I did not wish to disown the creed of my forbears, but at the same time there are several points in regard to which I cannot go quite so far as Calvin and John Knox, and I could not say plain 'Presbyterian' without suggesting that I was slightly more orthodox than I am in regard to predestination, for example, or in regard to the pope's being anti-christ. It would have been impolite to flaunt such an opinion as the last in the home of ministering angels professing a different creed. Besides, I have knelt to the pope and kissed his finger-ring in the Vatican, and was none the worse for it. John Knox would scarcely have done this, or regarded as a faithful Presbyterian a follower who did it.

For the time, however, I was not much concerned with theological niceties. Sitting propped up on a rubber air-ring, with fourteen pillows at my back and a pillow called a 'donkey' under my knees, I was content to think about nothing at all except what time of day it might be. In consequence of the early hour at which one begins the day in a nursing home, I often got the impression that it was late afternoon when it was not yet eleven o'clock in the morning, and so much was I out of my reckoning about the hours that, after a doze one day, I found myself asking a nurse quite seriously: 'Is it to-day or yesterday?' Not that the time passed slowly. To lie with one's mind a perfect blank is not necessarily to be bored. Even when I was too tired to read, I had only to close my eyes to see a page of print before me—it usually looked like a piece of an unknown work by Dickens—and, though I could not read it, I was greatly interested in trying to read it. Then, as the page came to an end, I would open my eyes to see it more clearly, expecting to find it in front of me, and was surprised to find nothing visible within reach except the pink

blanket. Crossword puzzles also formed themselves before my eyeballs when the lids were closed—puzzles with difficult nonsensical clues like ‘Seahorse in Kirkcudbright’—and I spent a good deal of time trying to solve these till my opened eyes told me that they were not there.

Apart from this the ministrations of nurses and doctors leave little opportunity for tedium. Was not the day punctuated by thermometer readings, draughts and medicine pellets, glasses of milk, and with my own prescription—sips of whisky as a preventive of pneumonia? Then, as temperature fell to normal, the food began to taste so delicious that I thought I had never tasted such fare since the war broke out, so that there was always a meal to look forward to. The very bread—even in peacetime it would be difficult to find bread of such celestial texture and flavour. As for the boiled egg or the orange that came with breakfast, how privileged a person one seemed to oneself at sight of them on the tray! There is something to be said just now for being a convalescent after a not too serious illness or accident. One can even with a good conscience keep a fire burning from daybreak or before it. In all things one belongs to a priority class.

Soon after comes the pleasure of recovery from helplessness. The humiliation of helplessness is at first rather overwhelming to any one to whom the life of a patient is a novelty. One is reduced to the condition of a new-born baby, even as regards washing, without the new-born baby’s beautiful unconsciousness of its plight. Even though the adult human being quickly adapts himself to so unusual an environment, the first stirrings of self-help are a luxury beyond boiled eggs and oranges. To be able to wash one’s hands and face is something. ‘Do it thoroughly,’ says the sister from County Louth. ‘Behind the ears, mind; I’ll investigate.’ To be able unaided to right one’s position in bed—to be able unassisted to get

out of bed and to stand on the floor with the help of a hand on the mantelpiece—as one regains these capacities one ceases to be a new-born baby and becomes a child that has just learnt to walk and feels more independent than perhaps it will ever feel again. One of the pleasantest spectacles of life is a child at this stage, making its way carefully downstairs by holding on to the banisters and impatiently rejecting the hand of an elder who wishes to take an arm as a precaution against a tumble. In such a mood of challenging self-reliance does one make one's first journey across the bedroom floor to the window to look out at the world again—not quite so good a world as one had imagined while lying under the blankets with nothing in sight but the leaves of a plane tree tossed by the wind into curiously human and animal shapes like the clouds of one's childhood—but at least the wide world from which one had been for a brief time an exile.

Next came the pleasure of being able to walk to the bathroom, to dress oneself, to sit in an arm-chair for hours at a time and to read poetry or rubbish or nothing—especially rubbish or nothing. As one sat there with the sun shining outside, the gas fire burning and good news coming over the wireless, the nursing home took on more and more the aspect of a holiday resort—a kind of wartime substitute for a deck-chair at the point of the Palace pier at Brighton. There was the same freedom from responsibility and a sense of duty, the same good weather reaching the mind through the body and inducing optimism in a loafer.

Still, the restoration of the power of walking was beginning to incite the blood to protest against this lotus-eating inactivity. Visions of myself taking a three-mile walk day after day till I died stirred me to noble purposes. Too much of my past life, I told myself, had been spent in an arm-chair—that contemptible halfway house between bed and manly vigour, and now that I had reached my second



childhood and realized once more how much more delightful is activity than lethargy I would convert this new pleasure into a habit and rejuvenate myself in more natural ways than by swallowing tablets from a patent medicine bottle. . . .

Now that I am at home again in an arm-chair I still dream of that three-mile walk, but with a daily weakening will. Perhaps with the next new moon or the return of double summer time my will will have grown stronger again, and I may begin walking for walking's sake. Or is it only in nursing homes that one cherishes such dreams, inspired by the proximity of the energetic Saint Paul with his unnatural passion for drinking tea at half-past five in the morning?





## IX. IN COUNTRY PENT

I WAS sitting in a train the other evening when a little man with a grey moustache spoke to me, saying—what was obvious—that the country was looking lovely. ‘I like the country,’ he went on, ‘but I was born and bred in London; and, of course, if you’re born and bred in London, you can like the country, but it’s never the same as London. I’m seventy now and have lived in London all my life. I was a builder, but I’m past my work, and my wife and I have come down to O—— since my house got a bomb. I live on an old age pension of ten bob a week—ten bob!’ (and he laughed ironically at the notion) ‘and my wife takes in a couple of lodgers. I’ve no complaints, but it’s not the same as being in London. Last night my missus says to me: “What you need is a day in London,” so this morning I got up early and took a workman’s return ticket to London—1s. 7d. instead of 6s. 4d.—and went off for a day’s holiday. I must have walked fifteen miles or so when I got there. From Waterloo I walked to King’s Cross, where I got into talk with a chauffeur who was going to Paddington to fetch a lady’s pet dog. Do you think that’s right with the petrol shortage? However, he said: “Would you like a lift?”; so off I went to Paddington. From Paddington I walked

to Chelsea and from Chelsea I walked to Putney Common, and caught a bus back and took a walk to Liverpool Street.'

'Have you a particular fancy for railway stations?' I asked him. I had often heard of pub-crawlers, but station-crawling was to me a new form of Epicureanism. 'No,' he said, 'but a railway station gives you somewhere to go. I never liked walking unless I felt I was going somewhere, even if it was only to the old "Angel" or the "Britannia."' Then I felt a bit tired and had a cup of tea, and after that I set off for Victoria to catch the train. I've had a good day—cost me very little—the best day I've had since the house got a bomb. In a sense we're happy in the country—I've heard nightingales and all sorts of things—but, if you understand me—a man who's been born and bred in London living in the country—well, he's just like a bird in a cage.'

This to me seemed an extraordinary reversal of the common notion of the relative liberty of town and country life. To most of us the country has, since our childhood, been a place to which to escape from the imprisonment of the streets. Even the railways become poetic in their advertisements of the liberation we enjoy if we travel from town a few miles into the country. 'Oh, who will o'er the downs so free?' they ask. No railway has ever issued a poster enticing country visitors to London with such sentences as 'Who will down the Strand so free?' or 'Who will off to Hoxton so free?' It is generally accepted by the railway companies as well as by the poets that it is the country—which includes the seaside—that is the home of freedom. It is only the minor poets, I think, who have praised the town above the country. Great poets sometimes—though not often—live in towns; but even when they do so, they usually write as though they preferred the country. To the great poets the bird in the cage has always been the townsman.

Yet, thinking over the matter, I wondered whether the little pensioner in the train was not, after all, more representative of the normal attitude to town and country than the poets. For some generations past, we have seen a constant drift of men and women from the country to the towns with no corresponding drift from the towns to the country. The rich, who can afford two houses, like to have a country house as well as a town house; but, if they had to choose between the two, most of them, I fancy, would sacrifice the house in the country. The comfortably-off, again, have shown a tendency to leave the centre of the towns and make their homes in the suburbs, but they would feel like birds in cages unless they were within easy reach of shops and streets. No modern slogan has had less effect on civilized men and women than the slogan repeated by statesman after statesman: 'Back to the land.' A few townsmen go back to the land and write good books about it, which everybody reads. But the ordinary townsman sticks to his town till he is bombed out of it, and a large proportion of countrymen still regard the town with its crowds, its lights, and its fried-fish shops as the El Dorado of liberty.

When I was a child, I knew a few boys who ran away to sea in search of freedom; but most boys preferred to stay in town at home. The majority of them were instinctively of the opinion of Dr. Johnson: 'No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into gaol; for being in a ship is being in a gaol, with the chance of being drowned.' Nor were the boys who stayed at home less adventurous than the boys who ran away. They simply had different ideas of liberty. A friend of mine who dabbles in psycho-analysis has a theory which may or may not explain the two types. 'Boys who run away from home,' he maintains, 'hate their fathers and do not much like their mothers. Boys who stay at home are devoted

to their mothers, and, though disliking their fathers, tolerate them for their mothers' sake.' But if this theory is true, does it not follow that the drift from the country to the town is also due to a strong antiparental bias? I confess I find it hard to believe that the countryside is largely populated by young Oedipuses.

It seems to me more likely that the preference of town to country originates in much the same state of mind as the preference of music-hall songs to Bach and Beethoven. The charm of the town, like the charm of the popular song, is more stimulating to the surface nerves. Some years ago an eminent judge declared himself strongly in favour of the town against the country, and eulogized the town in sentences that came as near poetry as he was capable of. 'I was in the country yesterday,' he said. 'How gloomy it was—enough to cause a nervous breakdown!' And he went on:

'Take a bus to Aldgate Pump, and then walk east among the bright shops, the laden barrows, the monkey-nut vendors, the fish-and-chip cafés, the stewed-eel parlours, the sausage-and-mashed centres of sociability, and the glamorous cries of the newsboys selling their "pipers." Turn off at a side street and see what prodigies of shopping can be done for one shilling in a barrow market that sells anything from a bag of oranges to a pair of trousers.

'If you are in Liverpool, stroll in the evening up the Scotland Road, and talk to the fascinating people you meet there, such as the "Mary Ellens"—the picturesque women who wear shawls over their heads, carry babies in their arms, work in the markets all day, and always have a good "tip" for to-morrow's race.'

One might imagine that, in saying this, the judge was aiming particularly at consoling the millions of people who by force of circumstances are imprisoned in towns—trying to persuade them, since they lived in purgatory,

that purgatory was a more enjoyable place to live in than paradise. One certainly cannot imagine Wordsworth writing as enthusiastically of monkey-nut stalls and stewed eels as he wrote of the skylark and the green linnet. Nor could he, I am sure, have written as beautiful a lyric about old Liverpool women who give tips for horse races as he wrote about the Highland reaper. Yet probably the judge in his praise of cities was more representative of modern human nature than Wordsworth. Even with wireless and buses to relieve the quiet of country life, thousands of people are still unable to endure the country. 'I wouldn't be found dead in this place,' I overheard a young evacuee saying one day to a country child. It will be interesting after the war to see how many of the London young have been converted to a permanent love of country life by their evacuation experiences.

For myself, I have always wanted to live in the country, but I wonder whether I should be happy in the country if I could not also spend part of my life in town. I find it, for example, very difficult to work in the country. There is too much to do, too much to see. I confess I find town restful after the wide open spaces. There are no goldfinches or gold-crests to distract one, and one does not need to worry about blight on the broad beans. How conducive to delightful thoughtlessness it is to walk from Waterloo Station to King's Cross and get a lift in a car from King's Cross to Paddington! That is, perhaps, the supreme charm of cities. There is always something to do that is not worth doing. Brick walls do not a prison make. No wonder that the caged birds of the countryside long to escape back to their anaesthetical ugliness.



## X. NORMAL LIFE

DE QUINCEY, in his essay on the knocking at the door in *Macbeth*, expresses the opinion that the effectiveness of this is due to our feeling that the current of ordinary life has been suspended by the unnatural murder of Duncan and that, at the moment of the knocking, 'the suspension ceases and the goings-on of human life are suddenly renewed.' 'When the deed is done,' he continues, 'when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds; the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human mind has made its reflux from the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.'

Some people may feel that the word 'goings-on' is more applicable to the activities of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth than to the knocking at the gate that disturbed the porter at Inverness Castle. But De Quincey is probably right in suggesting that there is something in the human make-up that finds at once relief from abnormality and intensification of the sense of tragedy in the swift resumption of ordinary life, even for a brief interval, after a catastrophe that has darkened the daylight. The ordinary man has a craving for the ordinary and, even in times of disaster—all the more, perhaps, in days of disaster—welcomes its reappearance as once was welcomed the sight of a little cloud out of the sea like a man's hand.

There is something in the spirit of man that refuses to accept tragedy and catastrophe as normal. The spirit of man is possibly wrong: the history books differ on this point from the sentimental novelists. In the Black-and-Tan era, Terence MacSwiney, the Lord Mayor of Cork, when he was asked by an English journalist what he thought of the Irish situation, replied: 'Normal. More normal that it has been since the days of Queen Elizabeth.' Yet at this time he was sitting in the mayoral chair of a predecessor who had been murdered by the police, and he himself was on the run and in danger of assassination. It was said that there was an underground passage by which he could escape from the City Hall in case it was raided. But the world in which he lived was peaceless, perilous, and violent. Most of us would have described it as utterly abnormal and wished for a good end to it and the return of an eventless civilization of chatter and tea-shops. Perhaps MacSwiney himself would have admitted that this, rather than guerrilla war, was the normal world, and would have explained that insurrection was normal only in a nation that was subject to foreign rule. I remember once meeting one of the most extreme of his lieutenants who



confided to me his opinion that the chief end of life was to read the poets and observe the beauties of nature. It seemed an odd confession, coming from a man who had been prosecuted for having been caught with sticks of gelignite under his bed. But obviously, as a philosopher, he realized that, in comparison with the world of trees and mountains and birds and wild flowers, keeping sticks of gelignite under the bed was abnormal.

Even then, indeed, the craving for ordinary things was shown by the continuity of sports and games. I.R.A. judges in illegal courts would abandon the dispensation of justice for a day in order to attend a race meeting. I saw a man one day at Athenry organizing a railway hold-up because armed police had taken their seats in a train. I saw him on the following Sunday in Galway, a passionate spectator at a football match, shouting objurgations from the touchline at the referee who had given a decision against the Athenry team. He was, I suppose, what would now in some parts of Europe be called a 'partisan'; but he was a partisan, not only in the angry violence of insurrection but in the relatively friendly violence of the football field.

England in time of war has shown a similar desire not to allow the pleasures of the peacetime world to be totally obscured, even by the titanic catastrophe that has fallen on European civilization. There were a few people who at one time demanded that racing should be suspended till the end of the war; but it was pointed out that soldiers were among those who most enjoyed the relaxations of a race meeting, and that for their sake, at least, racing should be allowed to continue. Betting, it is said, instead of being discouraged by the seriousness of our times, has doubled in volume since 1939. There are fewer dog-race meetings, but last year the sum 'invested' on the totalizators rose to £22,753,770, passing all records. I wonder what

games the Romans played when Hannibal was camped in Capua. Perhaps they made bets on the duration of the war, as many Englishmen have done during the last four years. It is said that bookmakers no longer lay bets on the war; but in the first eighteen months, when business was still bad, many of them would accept wagers, not only on the duration of the war, but on such matters as the number of siren warnings that would be sounded on a particular day, the number of German aeroplanes that would be brought down, and the nature of Hitler's end. The betting man will probably still be betting on the day of the last trump. He will be found, no doubt, offering to lay six to four on his chances of getting past Saint Peter. For the betting man is one of the world's optimists.

Much as I am in favour of keeping life as normal as possible even in its petty pleasures, I confess my blood ran a trifle cold as I read a story in the *Sunday Express* the other day about a sweepstake recently organized in an Essex public-house at the time of the one o'clock news. The story ran:

'From a radio set the B.B.C.'s six "pips" are sounded and the announcer begins the news.

'Everybody stops talking. The radio is turned on to full blast. The pub's staff gather round the set.

'A few minutes of rapt attention, and then the listeners pounce on one item of news. "Who's won it? Who's won it?"

'The rest of the news does not matter—they have merely been waiting for a figure; the figure which decides the result of their latest sweepstake.

'It happens that the winner is in the bar. Chorus of congratulation, loud laughter, and drinks all round.'

And the reporter added:

'What was the figure, the figure that won the money?

*Forty-eight. Forty-eight R.A.F. planes missing in the previous night's raid on Berlin.*

'And a cheerful toast was drunk—to the man who gambled on forty-eight planes and the lives in them.'

Readers of *This England* know that many incredible things happen between the English Channel and the Irish Sea; but I confess I should have found it easier to believe in the existence of the Loch Ness monster than in the existence of those monsters who could uproariously take part in a sweepstake about the mortality of men who were giving their lives for them. This is not normal life, but death of the soul—death of the soul due to the ultimate evil, want of imagination.

Not that games and gaming, however innocent, are a universal means of continuing normal life in abnormal years. The permanent interests of men and women are various and of a wide range, with philosophy at one end of the scale and darts, perhaps, at the other. Painting and music have their assiduous devotees no less than the cinema. There are some who would rather watch geese on a pond than human beings on a football field. Others take more pleasure in growing tomatoes than in growing wise. But the conspicuous fact is that, whatever a man's idle interests may be in the quiet times of peace, they continue to be his interests so far as he can manage this, even when history has begun to add a new chapter to its long record of breaches of the normal life.

To many of us a few years ago it seemed incredible that Spaniards should still be flocking to the cinemas during the siege of Madrid, and the tangoes that we heard from Bilbao on the wireless seemed poignantly out of tune with the events that we read of in the newspapers. But later on the same paradoxes of behaviour were to be seen in England. How increasingly loud became the clamour against the shutting of the theatres and cinemas at the

beginning of the war! The people, we were told, must be amused even in wartime—especially indeed in wartime—and the wireless kept doing its best to enliven them with songs about hanging up the washing on the Siegfried Line and with piping *Bonny Bobby Shafto* in programme after programme.

By the time that Germany invaded Russia, England had achieved so much of normality in its amusements that one sometimes wondered whether the Russians would not be shocked by such levity and regard the continued popularity of horse racing and dog racing as a proof that the English were not taking the war seriously. Later, however, one heard that the Russians, too, had maintained at least a small fragment of normal life on the very edge of disaster, and that even in Stalingrad there were companies of players and dancers to entertain the fighting men with peacetime pleasures.

All this, it seems to me, shows that human beings have an instinctive feeling that war and catastrophe are impermanent things and that the great and small pleasures of ordinary life are parts of a more enduring world than they. This may be an illusion, but it is probably up to a point a good illusion. Even in our view of the weather, we are inclined to think of gales, thunderstorms, and fogs as aberrations of nature and of pleasant weather as the norm and as something to which we have a natural right. The human race has been described as a race of wishful thinkers in wishful blinkers, and unquestionably it has preserved a more or less steady faith in the enjoyableness of life—its enjoyableness at intervals even to-day to be succeeded by the greater enjoyments of to-morrow.

The smallest trifle sets this optimism going again. The sun comes out, a brown hairstreak butterfly flutters among the rose leaves, and we all become temporary Panglosses. A heron flies leisurely high overhead, and the sky, instead

of being filled with war, becomes serene as in Arcadia. A chiff-chaff sings in September, and normality has returned if only for a moment. This seems to be true even at the apical crisis of history. So mortals were created. So, no doubt, they will continue to be till the race perishes.





## XI. UNPOPULAR

Of all living creatures insects, perhaps, have least won their way into the affections of mankind. There is usually a good reason for the dread with which we regard animals of other species: the dog, the gander, the shark, and the lion are dangerous. The fox may not threaten us physically; but he preys upon the birds by which the poultry-keeper makes his living. The rat may have no carnivorous designs against us, but he eats our food stores and carries in his skin plagues for the destruction of multitudes. A herd of cattle, again, may contain a bull who will stick us; and a horse in a field may, though he probably will not, savage us. Insects, however, many people dread simply because they are insects. I have heard young human beings screaming for no more reason than that an earwig, the most harmless of all things created, had appeared in a bathing box. I have listened to calls for help from women who had stood up to baton charges by the police, and the only reason for their cries has been that they had caught sight of the second most harmless of all living creatures, a spider, on the bathroom wall.

Even the insects of whom we think rather well on moral grounds are regarded with a certain amount of terror by large numbers of human beings. As children we used to be invited to consider 'how doth the little busy bee improve each shining hour'; but let a bee buzz round the head of a tennis player, and he will strike out at it with a racquet as at an enemy. I met an elderly countryman the other day who said to me: 'I never liked bees. I had an uncle who used to be able to take the honey from them without gloves or a veil. He let them crawl over his hands, and they would never hurt him, just as he was able to pick up rats by the tail and they would never bite him. But they always go for me. Bless my soul, if there was a bee on the far side of the common he would know I was here and come over and attack me. Some people say they find you by the smell, and I certainly do perspire a lot. They say somebody has invented a stingless bee, but how can you tell whether a bee is stingless or not till it has stung you?'

Just as the bee is the most useful of the insects, the butterfly is the most beautiful; but neither usefulness nor beauty seems to save insects from the hostility of the human race. The commonest of all the butterflies, the cabbage white, is treated by allotment holders as vermin. His kinship with the red admiral and the painted lady wins him no mercy from the cultivator of vegetables. How charmingly he flutters about the garden, bringing poetry into the dullest patch of 'greens'! Yet we treat him as a pest, a raider of our abbreviated food supply, and gardeners destroy him with as little compunction as though he were a mosquito. I may say that I have never killed a cabbage white butterfly; but that may be because I am not particularly fond of cabbage.

This hostility to insects must have begun early in the history of man, since two of the plagues of Egypt are represented as having been plagues of insects. Noah appears

to have shown little foresight in admitting two bluebottles and two tsetse flies into the Ark. What a chance he had for natural selection—selection at least natural to a human being! Half the pests of the world might have been liquidated as the waters were about to swell and swirl round Ararat. We are still suffering from Noah's lack of vision. Even in the highly civilized world of to-day man is engaged in a perpetual warfare against these Ark-bequeathed enemies.

Only the other day we were told of mysterious maggots that were causing 'widespread disasters' in allotments round London. 'Turnips,' it was stated, 'attacked by the maggot of an unidentified fly, are withering away in the ground.' The situation is quite sensational, as appears from the comment of an expert in the Ministry of Agriculture, who says:

'We have had several cases of this reported, but we have not yet been able to identify this maggot. It is some kind of fly, and we are breeding some out to discover the species.

'It bears a superficial resemblance to the maggot of the cabbage root fly, but I don't think it is the same pest.

'In some ways this has been an unusual year for insect pests. For instance, there is a fly called *Microchrysa polita*, which was found to be attacking Brussels sprouts at Finsbury Park. This fly has never been known to attack sprouts before. But the unusually dry spring caused it to seek a new and juicy food.'

From all this it seems that, in the matter of insects, we are progressing backwards. Our gardens have always been the haunts of pestilences, but every year they seem to become the haunts of new pestilences. We have been accustomed from our youth up to the carrot-fly, the turnip-fly, the onion-fly, the apple saw-fly, the green fly on the roses and the black fly on the broad beans; but, having fought these with soap-suds, nicotine, and paraffin with a



moderate amount of success, we have in our exhaustion to begin the battle all over again against new and unexpected enemies. Beelzebub, the god of flies, is apparently indomitable. Baffled to fight better, he launches fresh hordes against us just as we thought we had subdued him with Abol.

There is nothing human that he will not attack. A few years ago, for example, there appeared a paragraph in a London newspaper headed:

‘Beetle That Eats Buttons

‘Causing Slump in Braces in Australia.’

‘A tiny beetle,’ we were told, ‘only one eighty-fourth of an inch long, is causing trouble in Sydney, because it eats trouser buttons. So thoroughly does the little pest eat into the buttons that they are rendered useless for the important task that they have to fulfil. This creature does not attack buttons when they are on the cards used to sell them. The insect lays its eggs and then, when the grubs are hatched, they eat into the button, reducing it to a mere shell.’ A better instance of the devilishness of flies it would be difficult to imagine. As evolution advances, no doubt, we shall hear of the braces-fly and the belt-fly, the shoe-fly and the shirt-fly; and man, proud man, will be forced into nudism.

Would it, I wonder, have been any loss to the world if no insects had ever been created? Birds seem to like them as food, and I would certainly rather put up with midges than be without swallows and martins. But, on the whole, the insect is a destroyer, and even the birds seem to suffer as much from his existence as they gain by it. Horses shake their skins to get rid of him; cows swish their tails. No dog or cat that I ever knew was an insect lover. As for man, he may envy the industry of the ant; but who, except an entomologist, ever cared for an ant? Nor have any of the insects that invade our houses ever endeared themselves

to the heart of man. We have domesticated many living creatures and feel tenderly towards them; but the house-fly, the clothes moth, the spider, and the beetle remain outside the scope of our affections. The insect in the bedroom of a foreign hotel does not lull us into a sense of the romance of travel. I remember a room in Florence. I remember a bed in Le Touquet. 'C'est peu agréable,' said the chambermaid, when she was told of my bed companion. She was certainly right.

Man's procession through life might be described as a long experience of being bitten and avoiding being bitten. Everywhere hostility lies in wait for him. As a child in the country he finds himself blinded by a horse-fly. As a grown man, sitting in bliss on the downs in the chalk country, he gradually realizes that he is being eaten alive by harvesters. There are countries in which men have to sleep behind nets in order to outwit the thirst of insects, and countries in which, even though high on the way to the snows on the mountains, one dare not open a bedroom window in a hotel unless it is blocked by a punctured metal screen through which nothing bigger than a germ can enter. Travellers in the tropics are more in fear of insects than of alligators.

Fortunately nature has so contrived things that no insect exists comparable in size with the larger wild beasts and sea monsters. If there were insects as enormous as elephants or whales, how much more terrifying a place the world would be! According to the men of science, however, it would not be possible for a very large insect to survive. I was reading the other day of the giant dragon-flies measuring a yard across the wings that have been discovered among the fossils, and the author of the book describing them explained that the great dragon-flies died out simply because they were too large to breathe. Insects, it seems, have no lungs, but 'rely on the diffusion of air through a network

of tubes, which open in a series of holes along the sides of their bodies,' and 'air diffuses easily along such minute tubes' only for a short distance—less than a quarter of an inch. Hence, the monster insects of old found difficulty in breathing, became sluggish and fell an easy prey to their pursuers. Nature, it seems to me, deserves our gratitude for not having provided insects with lungs.

Let us not, however, exaggerate our antipathy to insects. Is there one of us who if, by pressing a button, he could destroy insect life from the face of the earth, would press the button? I, for one, like Noah, would want to preserve at least two specimens of the house-fly with its exquisite wing patterns. I should be sorry to miss not only the cinnabar moth in his coat of vermilion and grey, but the friendly wasp of summer picnics. Though there are said to be about thirteen thousand known species of butterfly in the world and about two thousand species of moth in the British Isles alone, I should like to see more, not fewer, butterflies and moths—more and not fewer bees and stag beetles and ruby-tailed flies. A garden would be a less lovesome thing, God wot, without the coming and going of insects among the flowers. A man who knew something about insects, indeed, might put up quite a good defence of them.



in consequence of not being forward enough to join in the seasonal impulse of the autumn or because of some slight injury.' He also suggested that an exceptionally mild winter had saved the bird from death through starvation.

No such explanation is offered, however, for the presence in England of all those other cuckoos which year after year are heard in the second half of February. These, every one will admit, are either migrants or myths. And most of those of us who do not hear them regard them as myths. On this point, our faith, or the lack of it, is fortified by the ornithologists who tell us that the cuckoo lives mainly on caterpillars, especially hairy caterpillars, which are unobtainable till later in the year. Some of these ornithologists maintain even that 'the date of the cuckoo's arrival is more constant than that of any other migrant,' and Sussex men have declared dogmatically that the cuckoo never arrives before April. The date of Cuckoo Fair, the Sussex gathering at which the old witch was said to liberate the first cuckoos from her basket, was April the fourteenth, and most of those who hear a cuckoo much earlier than that have probably only heard a local inhabitant practising bird-song. 'It was such a fine morning,' a villager once explained, 'that I thought I 'd give them the cuckoo.' But, before the explanation was generally known, the local clergyman had written to the papers, announcing the miraculously early arrival of the bird from Nigeria.

After all, the song of the cuckoo is not a particularly difficult piece of music. A child can imitate it. A machine can imitate it. Even the distant bark of a dog can suggest it, and our senses are deceivers. We are at the mercy of countless deceptions practised on us alike by sight, hearing, taste, and touch. I remember how, at a time when a German invasion was expected and the warning of the invasion was to be the ringing of church bells, I was walking along a country road with a woman who stopped

suddenly and said: 'Do you hear that? The church bells are ringing. This,' she said, with what I thought deplorable enthusiasm, 'is a historic moment.' I listened, and certainly from the distance there came a jingle-jangle not unlike the ringing of bells. As a wishful thinker, however, I remained sceptical, and my scepticism was justified, for we afterwards discovered that the noise was made by men with hammers dismantling a corrugated iron roof. Again and again I have come on instances of this gullibility of the ear. I have myself mistaken the squeak made by the unoiled wheel of a perambulator for the song of one of the less musical birds. On one occasion I sat in the company of a number of intelligent people, all of whom believed they were listening to the 'pheu pheu' of a distant nightingale. The noise was actually produced by a smoker in the company who was solemnly and without any intention to deceive blowing through his empty pipe.

Evidence, then, is not a mere matter of honesty in the observer. For the ability of even the most honest men and women to observe accurately is surprisingly imperfect. Honest observers will describe a stocky man as slender, a fair-haired man as dark. A Canadian journalist who once interviewed me said that I was 'blue-eyed' and 'carelessly dressed'—both statements inventions, especially the second for, when I looked at myself in the mirror that morning, I saw a carefully dressed figure that might have come out of a band-box. When we consider how inaccurate are human sight and hearing, we cannot but be surprised that juries can ever come to a confident decision on the evidence. Witness contradicts witness, and not always through a natural love of perjury. In politics we find the same conflict of evidence, one member of Parliament denouncing another as the result of having heard some sentence inaccurately. Even the greatest statesmen often give totally contradictory accounts of conversations in which they

have taken part and of scenes they have witnessed. It is easier to trust the honesty of human beings than their accuracy.

Let us, then, not be too censorious of the enthusiasts who hear the early cuckoo. After all, it is a mysterious bird and has for centuries been a symbol of deception. It has been called the Falstaff among the birds; and the Falstaff is the Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Its very cry is a mocking shout as though, a gay deceiver, it were playing a game of hide and seek. Why such a bird should be so popular is inexplicable. It is one of the most vicious of birds, yet it is loved chiefly by the virtuous. In the ears of those who hear the early cuckoo, its song is a song of innocence, conjuring up images of the purity of a spring morning.

I have seen it stated that the cuckoo has at least the virtue of being monogamous, but, as there are said to be six male cuckoos for every female it might be more accurate to say that the female cuckoo is polyandrous. Still, with all his faults, his voice opens, as does that of no other bird, the doors of the enchantment of April. Never did any other singer produce such magical effects with two notes. At the sound the world's great age begins anew every April. Nay, every February for the lucky people, the enthusiasts, the deluded, the letter-writers.



### XIII. DOUBTING THOMPSON

I REMEMBER reading some years ago of a small boy who, on being asked in Sunday school what was the name of the apostle who at first refused to believe that Christ had risen, replied: 'Doubting Thompson.' I think I wrote about him at the time, but he and his answer came back into my head the other day when I stumbled on yet one more example of the incredulity of the human race—an incredulity that is even more amazing than its credulity. And it seemed to me that Doubting Thompson was an excellent name for the kind of modern man who will believe nothing outside his own experience.

I have met a number of people lately who cannot or will not believe that it is possible for four people, using only two fingers each, to lift a heavy man from a chair half-way to the ceiling—a parlour game described a few weeks ago by Professor Joad on the wireless. It is easy to dissipate their doubts, of course, if enough people are present and there is a chair handy; but until they have seen fourteen stone of flesh hoisted skywards with no support but eight frail fingers they remain sceptical. The evidence of other

people's eyes—of other people's experience—is nothing to them. And even when the Doubting Thompsons have been convinced in regard to one thing, they go on being Doubting Thompsons in regard to others.

There are still, for example, an extraordinary number of people who doubt the existence of ghosts. I have never seen a ghost, and do not know what is the explanation of their appearance; but people whom I know and whose word I trust tell me that they have seen them or spoken to them, and I see no more reason to doubt the truth of what they tell me than if they told me they had seen a golden oriole. There are, I admit, people whose word I would not take on the subject either of a ghost or of a golden oriole. But, if a cool-headed and unsuperstitious woman who is a female edition of George Washington tells me that she saw a ghost, I must believe her. It was a woman of this type who told me how she once saw a ghost on the landing of a lodging house. On her way downstairs she stood aside to let an old lady pass who said gently: 'Don't be frightened.' When my friend got to the sitting-room she said to her mother: 'I wish Miss Day's lodgers wouldn't wear rubber shoes. I've just met an old lady on the stairs who appeared so silently and suddenly that she quite startled me.' When the landlady came in afterwards to lay the table, she was asked who the other lodger was, and she replied that there was no other lodger. Then, on hearing a detailed description of the old lady, she fell back into a chair, white and trembling. She said that, many years before, one of her lodgers, an old lady exactly like the one seen on the landing, had been burnt to death as a result of a paper catching fire, and that the apparition must have been her ghost. I for one do not doubt this. Of course, there is always a lingering doubt at the back of my brain; but, on the whole, I cannot doubt the existence of ghosts.



I do not doubt the occurrence of fraudulent ghostly phenomena; but that some ghostly experiences are real seems to me probable. Even the late Frank Podmore, most eminent of sceptics on such matters, declared in one of his books that the occurrences associated with the name of that noisy spirit, the poltergeist, were as genuine as they were inexplicable.

At the same time, it may have been a sound instinct that at one time led many people to doubt the existence of ghosts, witchcraft, and things of that sort. G. K. Chesterton once said that the genuineness of witchcraft was one of the best-attested things in human history; but the belief in witchcraft led to such orgies of fear and cruelty that the world was better without it. Ghosts, too, were objects of terror, making countrymen afraid to pass certain places in the dark. No one in the old days would have ventured to address a ghost genially as 'Old chap,' as Conan Doyle did at the only séance I ever attended. Conan Doyle spoke to spirits, indeed, as you might speak to children whom you are trying to persuade to be reasonable. Not that he thought them all as charming as children. He said to me: 'The mistake people make about spirits is that they think of them as angels, whereas most of them are the riff-raff of the spirit world.' Even so, he did not fear them, and, perhaps, if human beings ceased to be afraid of ghosts, doubt of their existence would cease to be desirable.

There is much to be said in favour of a good deal of doubt, however. If it had not been for doubt, we should be even more ignorant than we are. It is generally accepted that it was a good thing for Copernicus to doubt that the earth is the centre of the universe. It is generally accepted, too, that it was a good thing to doubt that the earth is flat. I have leanings myself towards the flat-earth theory and the Ptolemaic system; but facts are facts, and I yield to

men who know more about such matters than I. How admirable a thing it was, again, for men to come to doubt the divine right of kings and, later on, to doubt the divine right of property! If only Eve had doubted the word of the serpent, we might still be in the Garden of Eden. Alternatively, we might never have been born.

Every age is, I suppose, an age of doubt from some point of view. Even the ages of faith had their doubts if it was only concerning the uses of bath water. The mid-Victorian age believed in Moses and doubted Darwin. The present age believes in Freud and doubts Moses. Some ages, however, seem to be more prolific of Doubting Thompsons than others. I fancy that recent years between the two wars were more conspicuous for doubt than most. There was an increasing doubt of the old standards, good as well as bad. Agnosticism to a great extent displaced religion, though, as a fervent atheist once argued with me, a true agnostic would doubt, not only the existence of God, but the non-existence of God. Public men doubted the need for a League of Nations. Military men doubted the usefulness of tanks, though this had been proved even more conclusively than the rotundity of the earth. There was a paralysis of doubt, indeed, that came to an end only when people began to have doubts about the Maginot Line. Perhaps, the mistake of the modern Doubting Thompsons was to doubt too much and yet not to doubt enough.

It seems to me to be a good thing to doubt nearly everything contemporary—not to doubt obstinately or beyond the possibility of conviction, but to have occasional holidays of scepticism about modern theories—of psychology, education, and a score of other things. We easily become dogmatic about a new theory that is in the fashion as we become dogmatic about the virtues of an author who is in the vogue. It is one of the merits of Dr. Inge that he has been so austere and pugnacious a doubter in an age that

abolished his own (imaginary) golden age. He has written many shocking things, but the human race is none the worse for being shocked. We easily grow complacent, and the most complacent people of all are often those who accuse others of complacency. Hence the need for a shocking doubter of genius now and then, like Mr. Shaw.

Perhaps it would serve a good purpose if a day of the year were set apart as a day of doubt, on which we could all force our doubts on each other and so test their soundness. I know a man who doubts the existence of vitamins. He could, I imagine, be convinced if, talking such nonsense on a day of doubt, he were confronted with a number of rats fed on polished rice and that sort of thing. Other people doubt the virtues of patent medicines—even of one's very latest patent medicine, the advertisement of which would bring conviction to a moron. There are few things more depressing than to meet these Doubting Thompsons who apparently would rather remain ill than swallow a few drops or a few tablets with their meals. Others, again, have doubts about doctors, osteopaths, and naturopaths. I believe in the lot. I believe, indeed—at least, I could easily believe—in nearly any kind of 'path' except a neuropath. Cures are one of the things in regard to which doubt is nearly always a mistake. One drop of doubt will destroy the effect of a whole medicine bottle. One drop of faith, on the other hand, will fructify a bottle of coloured water.

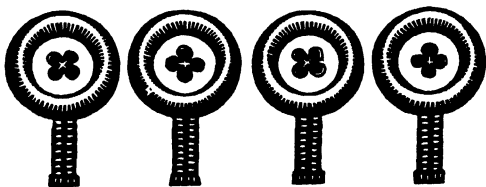
On the whole, I suspect I belong to the party of the credulous; I am inclined to believe what I am told unless I am talking to a liar—and one usually finds out pretty soon whether one is talking to a liar or not. I read somewhere once of a modern man who had been swallowed by some sort of whale and come out alive, and I believed this as readily as I once believed the story of Jonah. I can understand the credulity of those Portuguese motorists who were

recently persuaded that the juice of grapes was an effective substitute for petrol in the tank. Not many things are too strange to be true. Not even the fact that after due preparation it is possible for eight human fingers to lift a heavy man high into the air. It looks like a miracle, and it may be one; but, when he has seen it done, the old saying:

He that complies against his will  
Is of his own opinion still.

will hardly be true even of Doubting Thompson.





#### XIV. POCKETS AND BUTTONS

THE best-dressed of my friends came to see me on Sunday, and I thought I had never seen him looking more like the twentieth-century inheritor of the mantle of Count D'Orsay. To my surprise he told me that the new suit he was wearing was of the kind known as 'austerity' or 'utility.' There were no buttons—those showy superfluities of an over-rich civilization—at the wrists of his sleeves. His waistcoat was several inches too tight round the chest, he said, and several inches too wide round the waist, and he confessed that he had tucked up the lining at the back with a safety-pin to adjust matters. As for the trousers, they were built round the waist to accommodate, not my friend's graceful figure, but a Falstaff. What my friend complained of most, however, was not the absence of sleeve-buttons or faults of measurement, but that he had been denied a handkerchief pocket and that for the first time in his life he had had a hip-pocket thrust on him—to his sensitive taste, a grave indignity.

Had he not made these revelations, I should have continued to regard him as the best-dressed man in the south of England. Some of us go to Savile Row, and within a month we look as though we had bought our clothes when blindfolded from a secondhand dealer in misfits. My friend, on the other hand, makes any suit he wears look as if it had arrived from Savile Row the day before. I do

not mean to suggest that in times of peace he frequents any but the best tailors; but he is a man who gives distinction to clothes by wearing them; and, in being perfectly dressed, he owes even more to his native genius than to his tailor. He certainly would have filled with envy any would-be dandy who had seen with what exquisite grace he wore that austerity suit—safety-pin and all.

At the same time, to a man accustomed to the good things of life, the dearth of pockets must have been distressing. Multiplicity of pockets has been one of the phenomena of modern progress: you can always measure social advancement by an increasing indulgence in the unnecessary. We do not call men civilized till they desire more and more unnecessary things to eat and drink, and more and more unnecessary things to wear. The history of the pocket—and most pockets are unnecessary—would be the history in miniature of modern civilization. In no previous age, I am sure, were the pockets in men's clothes so numerous as they have become in the present wonderful century. I have myself twelve pockets in my jacket, waistcoat, and trousers; and, when I wear an overcoat, I carry seventeen pockets about with me. It is hard to imagine that men's clothes will ever contain a greater number of pockets than now. We might, of course, have two hip-pockets instead of one, and have other pockets let in at our knees and the bottoms of our trousers. But I fancy that, in their invention of extra pockets, the tailors have reached all but the limit.

One of the odd things in the history of pockets is that no sooner are men given a pocket for an apparently useful purpose than they begin to think out ways of not using it for its proper end, treating it as a purely ornamental part of the costume. Thus, some centuries ago, a utilitarian tailor invented a watch-pocket: there were watch pockets

of a kind, we are told, in the Forest of Arden. Then in our own time came the wrist watch, making the watch pocket superfluous for a large part of the population. But did the tailors cease to make watch pockets in waistcoats on that account? On the contrary, they went on making watch pockets with undiminished ardour, and no man would have felt fully dressed without them. Consider too, the handkerchief pocket. To most of us in the Victorian era this seemed to be the most indispensable of all pockets. Yet even here the ingenuity of man set to work and for a time made the handkerchief pocket superfluous by devising a fashion according to which it was the correct thing to carry the handkerchief in the cuff and to leave the pocket created for it empty.

I doubt whether there is a single pocket in the costume of men which the malice of fashion has not at one time or another tried to make useless. How many schoolmasters and parents have denounced the proper use of trouser pockets—which is to slouch along with the hands in them. 'It is rank bad manners,' says one schoolmaster of the habit of walking with the hands in the pockets. A peer has attacked the habit as 'dangerous,' because it produces round shoulders. If trouser pockets are so dangerous, however, why make them at all? At least why make two of them? One pocket may serve a purpose as a receptacle for small change, but few schoolboys have enough small change to fill two pockets. Fashion, however, insists on two pockets, however unnecessary, and mainly because they are unnecessary.

Even the side pockets in the jacket one is discouraged from using. I have always taken for granted that pockets are places to put things into, and have stuffed my pockets with anything that would go into them—books, newspapers, letters, pipes, pouches, cigarettes, match-boxes, and so forth. I once found eleven boxes of matches in the

pockets of a suit I was wearing. Yet even as a boy I was discouraged from making this, as it seems to me, natural use of my pockets. I was told that, if you put things into your pockets, you spoil the shape of your suit. This seems to me as ridiculous as it would be to say that, if you put potatoes into a sack, you spoil the shape of the sack. My inside breast pocket, stuffed with unanswered letters, may make a bulge that suggests malformation; but I dress for use, not for beauty; and my figure is nothing to boast of at the best of times. In any case, to say that you spoil a suit by putting things in the pockets seems to me as unreasonable as to say that you spoil a wardrobe by putting clothes on the pegs, or that you spoil a chest of drawers by filling them with shirts and handkerchiefs.

I am, I confess, a devotee of pockets. When I go to my tailor and he asks me what pockets I want, I tell him all of them. I have none of my friend's prejudice against the hip pocket: I have often found a pound note there that I thought I had lost. If you have enough pockets, you seldom lose anything. Look through the debris in one pocket after another, and everything ultimately turns up—the fountain pen, the cheque, the railway ticket, the spectacles, the diary for the year before last, the cough pastilles. With all one's seventeen pockets stuffed, one becomes a kind of walking Woolworth.

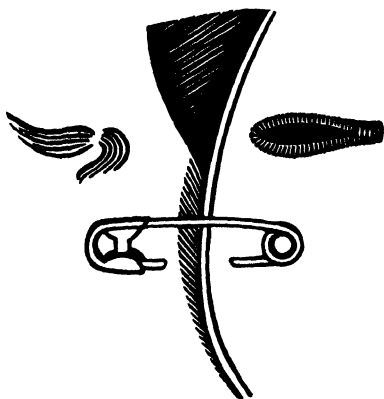
As for the buttons men wear, many of these, too, are preserved as mere ornaments. At present I have four buttons on each sleeve, and none of them seems to serve any purpose except to prove that we live in a spendthrift society. My jacket, which is double-breasted, has seven other buttons, two of them not even provided with button-holes. In recent years, the lowest of the six waistcoat buttons has become superfluous in the best circles. If the luxurious days of peace had lasted, I cannot help thinking



that one waistcoat button after another would have been left undone in obedience to changing whims of fashion, and that ultimately the waistcoat would have been worn unfastened down the entire front—an innovation which I think, given the right shirt and tie, would make for picturesque. But, even if this had taken place, the tailors would have gone on sewing on six buttons and producing six buttonholes as evidence that right-thinking men care nothing for economy. The number of buttons that I carry on my clothes, apart from the shirt and pants, at present, before I have put on my overcoat, is thirty-two, and a large proportion of them are almost as useless as a coster's pearlies. They give a cachet to the wearer, however, like his equally useless tie; and I must confess that, with no buttons on his sleeve, my friend—at a second glance—looked rather naked.

Why buttons should still be regarded as a decorative part of the masculine costume is not easy to understand. There is something to be said for the metal buttons of the soldier and the naval officer as aids to vanity. They have the air of having been left over from an age of gold and are symbols of boastfulness like a Red Indian's feathers. Alan Breck seems doubly vainglorious in the peacock tradition when we associate him with his silver buttons. The English word 'bravery' denotes finery as well as courage: and there is much to be said for a good man's going about in a bravery of buttons. These modern buttons that we civilians wear, however—made of bone or composition or whatever it may be—have no touch of the brave or the magnificent about them. They are no more distinguished than so many pins, and look as though they were meant not to be noticed. At best, they have no virtue but utility; and millions of buttons that are worn to-day are not even useful. It may be argued that even these last have the virtue of being superfluous, and (as I have already admitted

that love of the superfluous is a mark of civilization, I cannot deny that there is a case to be made out even for the modern sleeve-button. How commonplace it is, yet how exquisitely unnecessary! I shall certainly feel a little cold and inhuman when I put on my first utility suit.





## XV. SPADE AND BUCKET

I HAD a letter the other day about one of my grand-nieces, not yet three years old, who had just paid her first visit to the seaside. 'Lucy,' it said, 'took a day or two to get used to the feel of sand under her feet, so did not paddle at first, as she refused to take off her sandals. But now she loves it, writes A's and T's and some of the letters with her toes (quite good for not quite three) and paddles, not only in the pools, but in the whole sea. As I couldn't get her a spade and bucket, she had a wooden spoon and patty pans, so was able to do some very genuine cooking in the sand, even washing her sultanas (small stones) before putting them into her puddings. After picking up shells and then trying to pick the limpets off the rocks, she said they were "rather stuck."'

This was the first news I had heard of a shortage of spades and buckets, but, as life always moves, not chaotically, but in a pattern, I was not surprised when, opening the *Daily Mirror* on the next day, I came on a news story, headed: 'Seaside Ramp in Buckets and Spades,' and learned that 'the shortage of children's seaside spades and buckets has led to a ramp in wooden spoons, cake tins, and enamel pudding basins, which the children are using as substitutes.'

'Shopkeepers, at some holiday towns,' the article went on, 'are now charging 1s. 6d. for spoons which a few weeks ago coast a maximum of 9½d. Cake tins and pudding basins have rocketed from 1s. 3d. to 2s. 6d. In some cases the traders have tried to justify the prices by sawing the round ends off the bowls of the spoons and advertising them as "utility spades." Cake tins have holes drilled in the tops and wide handles of string of wire fitted, converting them into "buckets."'

Some people, reading this, might see in it a condemnation of the capitalist system; but to me it merely caused a pang—not a very serious one—at the thought that the long arm of austerity had reached out to obliterate even the toy spade and bucket—those essentials of a child's holiday at the summer seaside. For essentials they were to the younger inhabitants of that now ruined paradise—the age of Queen Victoria. (Not so much of a paradise for everybody, perhaps, but a paradise for those whose parents were unpoor enough to take them to the seaside.) I doubt whether the parents of any previous era ever had the charming notion of taking their broods annually to dig beside the sea. There is no word of an annual migration from ancient Babylon to a neighbouring Margate. There must have been many good fathers in Greece and Rome, but I do not think—I speak under correction—that classical literature contains a single reference to a child's spade and bucket. The sea-dogs of Elizabethan England went to sea themselves, but they never, so far as I know, played with their children on the sands, though many of them were Devonshire men. Even when Englishmen discovered the seaside as a pleasure resort, they seem for a long time to have regarded such places as Margate as watering places merely for adults—salt-water spas comparable to Bath and Tunbridge Wells rather than to the Walton-on-the-Naze that we know to-day.

The name of the man who first took his children to the seaside is lost to us in the mists of antiquity. The name of the man who, having taken his children to the seaside, first thought of providing each of them with a spade and bucket is equally forgotten. Yet he was a great inventor—a greater contributor to human happiness, probably, even than the man who invented the aeroplane. Who that was lucky enough to be born in the golden age—when dates cost a halfpenny for a quarter of a pound and many people could not afford the halfpenny—can ever recall his childhood at its most golden except as a spade-and-bucket childhood? To arrive at Portrush, to be led by the hand along Main Street—I think Miss Rose Macaulay once raised the question whether Ireland is the only country among these islands where Main Streets are common—to the toy shop with its cornucopia of little sailing boats, shrimp nets, fishing rods, pencils looking through the end of which you could see a picture of Dunluce Castle, mugs bearing an inscription in gold letters: 'A Present from Portrush' or 'A Present for a Good Boy,' dolls, photographs, penknives, and everything that the soul of man in the tadpole stage could desire—above all, spades and buckets, iron spades and wooden spades, blue buckets, red buckets, and green. In Mr. Priestley's play, *They Came to a City*, some of the visitors to the ideal city are disappointed and repelled. No child was ever disappointed in Portrush as he received his first spade and bucket from the hands of the man in the toy shop. He knew—even if only subconsciously—that he was in heaven. With a shrimp net and a sailing boat (price 4d.) added, he knew that he was in the seventh heaven.

How charming, then, was the descent to the sands! There are three stretches of sand in Portrush—the White Strand, the Black Strand, and the Ladies' Strand. As Mr. Shaw's Androcles would have done, I frequented in those days the Ladies' Strand. There ladies waterlogged in

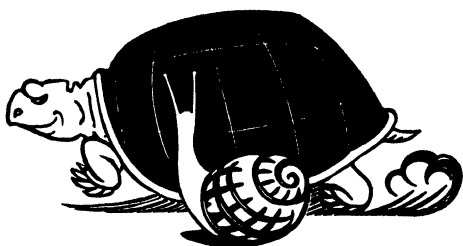
extraordinary heavy blue costumes that seemed more suitable for keeping an Arctic explorer warm than for enabling a lady to enjoy a swim, bobbed up and down a few feet out during the best part of the day, as clamorous as sea-gulls. We paid little attention to them, however. We were intent on our own pleasures. To fill a bucket slowly with sand, to turn the bucket upside down and, removing it, to see a castle built, as it were, with one's own hands—it was to feel for the first time the joy of artistic creation. One was not content with one's first efforts, however. The restless spirit of creation grew, as one advanced from a small size of spade to a larger, until at last one was old enough to possess an iron spade. How furiously we would then dig, throwing up a round wall of sand around our deepening dwelling, hollowing a moat outside it, and digging a channel along which the incoming tide could pour into the moat! We knew that the sea would make short work of our hard-won architecture; but we welcomed the destruction and prepared the way for it. The more the salt water poured along the channel into the moat, the more it seemed for us a personal triumph. As our Atlantis succumbed before the advancing ocean, we felt no grief but only happiness. Being optimists, we knew that we could and should rebuilt Atlantis another day.

Not that we spent all our time with spades and buckets. There was also the pleasure of paddling or, as we called it, wading. To wander along the edge of the ocean in bare feet and to feel the crisp crystal wavelets breaking coolly over one's ankles is a luxury that still gives pleasure in the memory, even though—for some obscure reason—we never think of paddling in later life. The sea delights at least four of our senses—touch, smell, sight, and hearing. Of how few of the things that came into existence in the first chapter of Genesis can we say as much! I could sit for hours in those days watching other people diving into the

sea and swimming among the billows—great men who, despising the spring board at the Blue Pool, would climb up to a high ledge among the rocks and precipitate themselves as if to death or glory into the deep water.

From the shore-child's point of view there is nothing about the sea that is not lovely and lovable. The wildest storm-breakers pouring in from Greenland and tossing manes of foam into the air, filled with a hundred rainbows in the fitful sunshine, exhilarated the blood, even though one had heard of some poor wretch who, bathing in the bay against all advice the day before, had been carried out to sea like a piece of sea-wrack. The noise of a crane unloading a ship in the harbour was music. The very smell of the coal on the harbour side was (being a seaside smell) sweeter than the scent of a flower garden. Seaside bread—baps and the rest of it—and seaside plum-tarts were ambrosia. Seaside tea was nectar.

I trust that my grand-niece has by now been initiated into some of these essentials of perfect happiness. I confess, however, that I feel some misgivings when I think of her, deprived of spade and bucket, going down to the sands with a wooden spoon and patty-pans. Someone, it seems to me, ought to do something about it. Spades and buckets can hardly be accounted luxuries. As a child at the seaside, I should have preferred a spade and bucket to black-currant juice. And, after all, let us consider the educational value of a spade and bucket. I for one learned more from digging in the sands with a spade and bucket than I ever learned from algebra.



## XVI. SPEED

I MET the other day a man who works on the railway, and, as the conversation turned on the scarcity of various wild animals nowadays, he said: 'Have you noticed how seldom you see a hare to-day? My goodness, we used to have hares running along the railway tracks. It was one of the commonest sights to see them running between the lines in front of a train and beating the train every time.' 'But not an express train,' I suggested. 'Yes,' he said, 'they would run in front of an express train just the same. Always kept the same distance in front of it; and I have never known the train to overtake them.' Rather surprised, I asked him how it was that greyhounds ever overtook hares and whether greyhounds also ran faster than express trains. He said: 'If a hare went straight on instead of turning, a greyhound could never catch it. It's the same with a rabbit. If a rabbit ran in a straight line from a stoat, the stoat could never catch it. But a rabbit gets kind of mesmerized and runs in circles. That's what finishes it'; and he gave me some unpleasant details of the way in which stoats compass the death of rabbits.

I have always been divided between my delight in the speed of other living creatures and my pleasure in the



dilatoriness of that other living creature that is myself. I drew much consolation during my childhood from the tale of the hare and the tortoise, for I was a tortoise myself, incapable of winning a race even against the village cripple. At the same time, though I was a tortoise, I was as much inclined as any hare to take a rest under a tree and to let the world pass by me. There were few things in my copy-book that seemed to commend my way of life; but one of them was the proverb: 'More haste, less speed.' I liked to walk with a deliberate slowness, as a challenge to the mockery of the school athletes whom I loved. When I came to the school gates I used to slow down my pace to a snail's crawl, mainly because I knew that John Ferris, captain of the school fifteen, would be waiting in the porch and making ribald remarks about me to others as an antedated physical wreck—a devitalized Methuselah in his teens. Pose? Of course it was a pose. Shakespeare, who knew something about life, said that all the world's a stage; and my chosen part was that of the tortoise.

None the less I worshipped speed; and I suppose no one can have idolized a swift three-quarter back—or, as he was then called, a half-back—more than I did. Sam Lee, the schoolboy international, was to me the sort of man Pindar used to write odes about. Would W. B. Smyth's knee recover in time for him to play in the school cup final? That was a question that caused me even more anguished thought than whether the obscure pain from which I was suffering was the first symptom of hip-joint disease—one of the neurotic fancies of those days. Never did I see a boy or a man running well in the football field without feeling as much pleasure in the sight as in hearing good music. Speedless myself, I adored speed; and I adore it still. Those who were present at Twickenham at the last match played between the French Army and the British

Army will remember a try scored by a tall French three-quarter back who, beginning near his own goal line, outran and outswerved fifteen eminent English players and crossed the line, and how the ranks of Tuscany rose in the stands and cheered him again and again as the men and women of Dublin must have cheered at the first performance of the *Messiah*. Recall, too, Obolensky's two tries against the New Zealanders not long before the war. Those were the stuff of poetry, and it was just that, when Obolensky tragically crashed at the beginning of the war, Mr. Ivor Brown, who loves the game, should celebrate his fame in verse.

Yet speed alone is not enough. To give us the greatest pleasure it must be associated with contest, like the hare's race in front of the express train or the footballer's side-stepping and swerving and finally outpacing an army of opponents. Only an expert could enjoy watching a runner of genius racing a hundred yards without a rival. If there were only one starter for the Derby—even if he were a Hyperion—how many people apart from connoisseurs would take the trouble to go to Epsom to see his lovely movement over the grass? Our pleasure in speed depends largely on the lesser speed of other participants in a race. Sometimes a man of speed, such as a racing motorist, sets out to beat not an opponent in the race but a record; but you will always find that speed is most exciting when there is something or someone to defeat. If this were not so, we should not be interested in watching human beings running, since they are slow creatures in comparison with the horse, the hare, and the dog. We should not even be interested in seeing these excellent animals running, since they are slow in comparison with the motor-car and the aeroplane.

It is only because our main interest is not in speed for its own sake, but in relative speed, that we continue to enjoy

such things as horse-racing in an age of mechanical invention. After all, the swiftest Derby horses lollop along at about the same pace as a motor-car slowing down on its way through a built-up area. Yet they do not seem to be lolloping along. They sweep round Tattenham Corner like thunderbolts. Such are our illusions about speed, however, that if motor-cars came round Tattenham Corner at the same speed, we should regard them as little better than Victorian four-wheeled cabs. How slow the Oxford and Cambridge boat race would seem if we thought simply in terms of miles per minute, and compared it with the feats of mechanical boats that, as they skim along the water, can outstrip the lightning!

Perhaps, however, I have exaggerated. Speed is lovely, without competition, even to a child. To be given the reins in a pony cart on the way to church in the country on a Sunday morning and to be allowed to flick Ned into lordlier pace than the usual jog-trot was to experience a lyrical ecstasy. To hold the reins was always good, but to drive him slightly faster than one's uncle drove him—that was the ideal. And speed under a blue sky prepared one for the sermon. After one unyoked the horse in the stable of the country town public-house, one enjoyed the Presbyterian service as part of a day in paradise.

Sliding, again, was pleasant over winter ponds. I was always a Pickwickian slider, inclined to turn back to front and to get in the way of the other sliders before they had reached the end of their journey. But, even so, the sense of speed, as one's boots moved across this frictionless Utopia, made one feel as happy as a bird with the freedom of the air. Skating was even better. To tear across ice-bound stretches of water by moonlight—even if the world would end to-night—seemed the acme of enjoyment; and this though one had no genius for the outside edge. I have never taken part in winter sports, but I can understand the

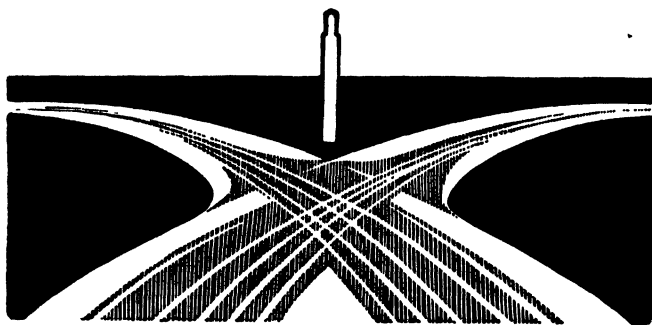
pleasure happier men have experienced in those extraordinary footless swoops through mid-air. It must be almost as good as shooting the chute, as I used to do at Earl's Court, and did once more some time after midnight at Southport on the last occasion of the total eclipse of the sun in England.

The older I grow, however, the less envious I feel of those living creatures that accomplish speeds beyond the conception of the pedestrian human race. They say that there is a species of Brazilian bot-fly, called the *cephemyia*, only a half-inch in length, which can travel at the rate of eight hundred miles an hour. I am sure I can attain as fine a sense of speed by urging my Austin Twelve up to forty-five miles an hour. One of the curious paradoxes about speed is that it is only in the low-powered cars that one has a sense that one is driving, as we Victorians used to say, like the devil. High-powered cars move so smoothly that even when they are running at seventy miles an hour they give the impression that they are proceeding at walking pace. To enjoy speed to-day, the truth is, one has to travel in a rather antiquated low-powered car. When W. E. Henley wrote his ode in praise of speed, after his first experience of motoring, he had probably driven in a car that went about as fast as a peacetime bus making its way from Victoria station to Hampstead.

Hence, in this age of relativity, there is no need to envy the records of the *cephemyia*, with its eight hundred miles an hour. There is no need even to envy the record of the hare that runs between railway lines and keeps a few yards in front of the express train. Human beings cannot compete with such monsters, but they can obtain all the ecstasy of speed by swimming from one end to the other of a swimming bath or by trying to win a hundred yards' race under ten seconds, or by overtaking a ten-year-old car on the road with a car two years older.

Speed, some people say, is the curse of the modern world. But it was also the ideal of all the ages. I wonder what was the pace of Jehu, the son of Nimshi, who drove furiously. Probably much less than that of a taxi-cab creeping through London in the year 1942.





## XVII. SIGNPOSTS

FOR the first time since 1939 I spent the week-end in a country hotel. As we went for a walk—of about two hundred yards—in the morning, a friend who was with me said: ‘Hallo! The signposts are back again.’ He was obviously elated as he read out the inscriptions on the white boards— $\frac{1}{2}$  mile to Chipping-Something-or-Other,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles to Bowling-under-Bracken, 37 miles to Oxford. It was as though a miracle had happened, and, after a long period of obscurity, the almost forgotten sun had shone again. I confess I was surprised at my own lack of surprise on seeing the world looking as normal as it looked a year or two ago. I ought to have been all the more pleasantly surprised since I had not heard of the removal of the ban on signposts. The sight of the signposts, however, did not stir my imagination as it should have done. They seemed so natural a part of the landscape that it was difficult to believe they had not always been there and to see in them especial omens of good news, as in some respects they are.

Yet how one missed them when they first vanished at a time when a German invasion of England was thought to be possible! What a Hampton Court maze all England became to a motorist trying to find his way to some unfamiliar spot

in Surrey! The motorist's difficulties were added to by the refusal of some particularly patriotic people to tell strangers the way. There was a widespread theory that any stranger driving a car might be a spy, and that to put him on the right road to Dorking might be playing into the hands of the enemy. One day, I saw a motorist pulling up and asking a farmer the way to a neighbouring town. As the farmer was giving him the information, a woman shouted from her garden: 'Don't tell him. You know you're not supposed to tell strange men the way now.' The farmer protested that he knew the man; but the woman warned him that giving information to suspicious characters such as strangers driving along the roads in motor-cars was a criminal offence. 'What I say is,' she observed, turning to me for support, 'is, suspect everybody. You can't be too careful, and the more innocent a stranger looks the more likely he is to be a German spy.'

On my few journeys along the roads at the time, I was fortunately never lost for lack of guidance from passers-by. Soldiers and policemen were particularly ready to tell one the best route to Horsham or Haywards Heath. It was a nuisance to travel in unknown country, because one had to stop so often to find out where one was and how to get to the place one was aiming at. But there were willing helpers in every village and it was only the imaginative—always a minority—who were likely to take one for a spy.

Whether the removal of the signposts was ever necessary I do not know. I cannot help thinking that, if a German army had ever invaded England, it could have found its way from Abinger Hatch to Abinger Hammer without the help of a signpost. The authorities, however, were justly zealous in their desire to bewilder the enemy. In some parts of the country even ancient milestones had the names of places on them chiselled out of recognition. Some people took the names of their cottages from the gates, as

though a German might have learnt something useful from knowing that he had reached 'Nirvana' or 'Crosskeys.' One of the oddest features of the period was the obliteration of the names of religious sects from the notice-boards outside churches. In consequence of this a stranger to a village could not tell whether the little chapel on the green was Baptist or Methodist or Congregational. I remember reading in some paper or other a letter from an embittered Methodist complaining that during the week-end he had found himself worshipping, much against his will, at a Baptist service. If there are no notice-boards outside the churches to guide them, young people may drift unsuspectingly even into Unitarian places of worship. Still, it was pleasant to think of a German general being held up with his army while he tried to make out whether the building he had just reached was a Methodist or a Congregational chapel. 'Puzzle the enemy' is a good rule. As things turned out, however, the only people in England who were puzzled by all these anti-invasion measures were the natives.

To-day, I imagine, these measures are no longer necessary. And England will probably soon become a land of signposts again, though without the petrol that makes signposts useful. Milestones will be allowed to tell once more how many miles it is to the next town. I shall welcome the change back, though I have no sentimental associations with such things. Growing up in a world of horse-traffic I never experienced the motorist's helplessness in the absence of topographical information at every cross-roads. In those days, when the radius of ordinary travel by road was so small, we all knew the way to any place that could be reached in a polo-cart. Milestones, on the other hand, did add something to the pleasures of travel—especially of travel on foot. There was something inspiring in the sight of an old moss-grown block of stone that told one that one was another mile nearer Coleraine. A journey



seems shorter if we measure it by units, and a milestone is not a bad thing to sit down beside to meditate on the next stage towards one's destination. The powerful effect of milestones on the imagination is shown in the story of Dick Whittington and his cat, for it was while sitting on a milestone on Highgate Hill that he heard the London bells calling him back to the city. This milestone, it is said, was removed and put in storage for the duration of the war, as it might in some conceivable circumstances, though not conceivable by me, have given valuable aid to the enemy. I think, now that the London bells have been allowed to ring again, the Whittington milestone might be replaced. If the Germans ever got to Highgate they would not need a milestone to be told how far they were from London.

One point of superiority that milestones have over signposts is that they cannot lie. It is, no doubt, possible for practical jokers to dig up a milestone from its right position and to set it up misleadingly two or three hundred yards away. But I have never heard of any enthusiastic humorists doing this. Signposts, on the other hand, were fairly often in peacetime the toys of practical jokers. There was a base fellow, for example, who once changed the direction of the signpost at Toot Hill, near Ongar, in Essex, to the destruction of the happiness of innumerable motorists. 'Motorists,' writes a historian of the occasion, 'going from Epping to Chelmsford through Toot Hill, found themselves after a journey of over fifteen miles back in Epping again.'

About the same time another practical joker got busy with signposts at Chenies, in Buckinghamshire. 'The signposts were turned round, with the result that motorists desiring to get to Chesham found themselves at Rickmansworth and vice versa, while others were directed into a cul-de-sac leading to the church.' Perhaps it was the same lively spirit who thought of the notion of reversing the '30' signs at Amersham, 'giving motorists the

impression that the town was derestricted and the roads leading out of it restricted.'

I have just been reading *The Wrong Box* again, so that I cannot honestly say that practical jokes are never funny. Still, though it may be funny to change the labels on the packing cases in a railway train so that a timid man expecting a statue finds himself in possession of a corpse, I cannot see much fun in misleading motorists. There is a fine sentence in the Communion Service in the Prayer Book: 'Cursed is he that maketh the blind to go out of his way'; and I should like to see this amended so as to lay the curse on any one who has made even a motorist go out of his way. It is all very well to go to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head if you are in the mood for such things; but motorists usually prefer more direct routes.

Let us hope, then, that when the hundred thousand signposts that have been removed from English roads are restored to their places they will no longer be a temptation to the sense of humour even of a drunken adolescent. And let us hope that they will be restored soon. It is nice to know the way even to places to which for lack of petrol one cannot go. The fork of the roads looks naked without signposts. Signposts will give the country a properly dressed look, a cheerful appearance of revival.



## XVIII. THINGS ONE HEARS

I WAS sitting in an inn about a fortnight ago discussing the weather when a countryman said: 'Look out for February the 2nd. If we get rough weather on the 2nd of February that means the winter is over and the rest of the spring will be shucky.' I had never heard the word 'shucky' before, and learned after inquiry that it meant 'on and off' or 'so-so.' I was also so ignorant of the church calendar that I did not know that the 2nd of February is Candlemas Day, and that Candlemas Day is the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary. I was ignorant even of the fact that Candlemas Day is a weather prophet almost as much relied on in some country parts as Saint Swithin's Day itself.

On looking up Chambers's *Book of Days* I found that the countryman's desire for vile weather on the 2nd of February was not the effect of some modern superstition, like the fear of lighting three cigarettes from one match. Chambers quotes not only a Latin distich in which Sir

Thomas Browne refers to the day in *Vulgar Errors*, but a traditional Scottish rhyme which runs:

If Candlemas day be dry and fair,  
The half o' winter's to come and mair;  
If Candlemas day be wet and foul,  
The half o' winter's gane at Yule.

Chambers also quotes two German proverbs on the subject which might make even an infidel wonder whether it would not be the best thing in the world to be rained on, hailed on, and blown off one's legs on Candlemas Day. One of the proverbs runs: 'The shepherd would rather see the wolf enter his stable on Candlemas Day than the sun.' (Why 'stable,' I wonder.) The second proverb says: 'The badger peeps out of his hole on Candlemas Day, and, when he finds snow, walks abroad; but, if he sees the sun shining, he draws back into his hole.' Chambers, who was clearly a Presbyterian, comments on these beliefs: 'It is not improbable that these notions, like the festival of Candlemas itself, are derived from pagan times and have existed since the very infancy of the race.' Thus do some of the most powerful intellects among the Scots explain inherited knowledge away. They dismiss it as 'these notions.' They will not even admit that it may be the result of prolonged observation of what happens on and after the 2nd of February.

Everybody who reads the papers knows what kind of weather prevailed over the English Channel on the 2nd of February. I confess my heart sank as I read such headings as 'Channel Gale Has Subsided' and 'Straits Gale Subsides.' 'After another rough night,' said the report, 'when there were further heavy rainstorms, the gale which has been sweeping the Straits of Dover blew itself out to-day.' The only gleam of hope shone from the second paragraph of the report: 'The sea has moderated, but it is still rough.

After daybreak there were heavy storm clouds towards the French coast.'

Always an optimist, I found my spirits reviving as I thought of those storm clouds towards the French coast. Perhaps, the weather in the coming months will be shucky after all. At the same time, I must admit that I felt gloomy as the sun appeared in all its horrid splendour when I was on my way to work, and people who did not know any better could be heard cheerfully saying to each other: 'Beautiful morning.' I hope those who deride country superstitions will make a careful note of the weather that in the coming months will follow the subsidence of the gale over the English Channel in the first hours of Candlemas Day, and report on the evidence in the same scientific spirit in which the laboratory student reports on experiments with electrons or vitamins or what not. It will be interesting to see whether the German badger's apprehensions prove to be well founded. I myself am willing to bet six to four on the badger.

It used to be thought a poor misuse of the conversational powers of men to talk about the weather; but to me it is always one of the good subjects. It is a subject about which one is always hearing something new. In the inn, for example, another countryman told me something I had never known before of the effect of weather on cuckoo clocks.' 'Old cuckoo,' he said, speaking of his own cuckoo clock, 'he won't come out when it's cold or draughty. He won't sing unless he knows it's warm outside. He's a regular barometer, my old cuckoo, and I would trust old cuckoo sooner 'n any barometer. Old cuckoo always knows, and, if it's cold or draughty, he stays indoors.' The speaker, however, was a man who seems to have had exceptional experience with clocks and watches. He declared that if he put the best-regulated watch in his waistcoat pocket, with its face to his body, it would begin to

go slow and lose an hour a day. This, he maintained, was a common phenomenon, and he told me of men he knew who had to carry their watches with the face pointing away from the body, and with a piece of leather intervening at the back, in order to be sure of knowing the right time. He himself, he said, always carried his watch in his overcoat pocket. I have often wondered what evidence there is for horological aberrations of this kind. Perhaps the Brains Trust could throw some light on them. I am sure Commander Campbell could tell us of watches that played strange tricks on the approach to the coast of the Andaman Islands.

I do not know whether I live in a peculiar territory of myths; but, during the gale that preceded Candlemas, another countryman told me another fact about clocks that was new to me. We were talking about the effect of the gale in causing a breakdown in the telephone system and in cutting off the electric supply in the kitchen. He knew I had an electric clock and asked me: 'Did it stop your clock?' I told him no—that, though the electric cooker had been put out of action, the clock was behaving normally. Then he asked me: 'Have you ever seen an electric clock going backwards?' I had heard of imbecile ducks that walked backwards, but never of the hands of a clock moving widdershins. I asked my informant what was the cause of this, and he, who claimed that he had seen the phenomenon, said: 'I don't know. I think it's thunder.' This is another statement that I hope someone more observant than myself will attempt to verify. After all, if thunder can turn milk sour, why should it not be able to put the clock back? 'There are more things,' said Hamlet in an admirable address to Horatio; and this may be one of them.

The oddest thing that I have heard during the past fortnight, however, had nothing to do with meteorology. I

was sitting in the London counterpart of an inn with a friend who is a psycho-analyst, and my friend was saying that, fanatic though he is, he was horrified by the prophecy of one of his idols that a time would come when it would be possible to give psycho-analytic treatment to animals. At this a woman who was sitting at a neighbouring table, and eating a sandwich, looked round and said: 'Oh, but that is being done already.' 'Oh,' said my friend; 'what animals?' 'Lots of animals,' she told him. 'Especially mules. I have heard of scores of mules being cured by psycho-analysis.' 'But how is it done?' asked my friend. 'Auto-suggestion,' she said gravely. I could see that my friend was puzzling his brains as to how it was possible to auto-suggest a mule. How does one discover a mule's dreams? How does one break one's way through to his psyche, and wrest from him the secret of the libido or the repressions that may have been the cause of his stubbornness? If I had not had to hurry back to write some copy for the printer, I should have liked to inquire into the behaviour of mules when all their conflicts had been resolved and their lives altered. But duty called, and I kept silent.

'Psycho-analysis,' continued our authoritative neighbour, 'has been particularly successful with rabbits. I have heard of quite a lot of rabbits being cured by psycho-analysis.' Never having kept a rabbit, I did not know that rabbits suffered from anything of which they needed to be cured; but no doubt their underground life affects them in all sorts of ways. I suspected for a moment that my leg was being pulled—always an easy thing to do—but our neighbour was obviously speaking in all seriousness. 'And dogs,' she went on, 'dogs are easy to treat. If a dog is always barking, don't beat him. Talk to him. If the most atrocious dog rushed at me in the dark, I would undertake to cure him in a few seconds. I always make a point of talking to dogs in a southern accent, by the way; dogs

seem to respond to it. An Irish accent, too, is said to be soothing to animals. That is why the Irish are so good at training horses.'

As I tore myself away I could not help reflecting: 'What a wonderland we live in! And to how small an extent most of us have explored the mysteries that surround us! What with ducks and electric clocks that go backwards, and mules and rabbits that are cured by psycho-analysis, the world is still as strange as it was in the days of the voyage of Maeldun.' Keep your ears open, and you will learn much that is not contained in the encyclopaedias. I have done so to some extent in the past fortnight.







### XIX. RARA AVIS

As I was walking through the Temple the other day, I heard a bird whose song I could not recognize singing among the ruins. It was a very short song and it was not particularly beautiful; but, as I had never heard it before, in the Temple or anywhere else, I was sufficiently interested to stop for a moment or two in the hope of identifying the bird that was producing notes so original in the heart of London. At first I thought my ear might be deceiving me—for I know little about birds—and that some common bird like a robin might be casually singing a note or two, varying its song as robins often do. A few days later, however, on hearing the bird among the ruins again, I suspected that it must be a stranger to London, and it was with pleasure that I read in *The Times* the next day that someone else had even seen the bird and identified it as a black redstart.

Probably, if black redstarts were as common as chaffinches, we should think less of them; but, as they happen to be rarities—to the common eye, at least—the appearance of a black redstart in the City pleases the imagination like a visit from the Cham of Tartary. The birds that one has never seen, or has seen only rarely, have a spell that none of the familiar birds, however beautiful, can rival. The first time that one sees a new bird is an occasion that

remains in the memory. I remember clearly seeing a black redstart near Steyning shortly after the end of the last war. One experienced an elation like that of stout Cortes in different circumstances as one watched it, black of body and with the bar of red-hot iron near its tail, flying across the road to a small cottage. Never since then have I seen black redstarts except at Varangeville in August, when they were flitting about the cliff path up which the commando troops climbed during the raid on Dieppe. Once more the world became a lovelier aviary because of their presence, but once more the loveliness was due to the rarity of the bird rather than to any superiority it possessed over the common jay or the commoner blue tit.

One of the worst features of a zest for bird-watching is the way in which one again and again succumbs to the passion for the quest of the *rara avis*. There are no birds to surpass the commonest birds—the larks, the black-birds, the thrushes, the robins, the wrens, and the tits—yet, when one acquires a taste for amateur ornithology, one becomes as restless in one's search after novelites as Alexander in his longing for more worlds to conquer. Only the birds we have never seen belong to an Arabia of the mind. Lovely though they are—and through their associations they have inspired better poetry than the others—the birds we know best lack that element of foreignness that has made men travel during the centuries in pursuit of something new. To discover a new bird is like reaching a South Sea island for the first time. Try to imagine what it must be like to see for the first time a wall-creeper, a bee-eater, or an Arctic blue-throat.

To the learned ornithologists, of course, few birds are rarities. They seem to find wrynecks in every April wood, and spotted flycatchers in every garden. Most of us, however—perhaps luckily—have neither the time nor the persistence to discover how common many bird

besides sparrows are. Terns, for example, the most graceful of all the birds of the sea, are said to be fairly common—the tern according to one authority, ‘nests all round our shores . . . and large numbers visit us on passage’—but to me they are rarities that I can remember having seen only at St. Ives, Hastings, and, best and most numerous of all, in clouds of thousands of them, at Conall Ferry. In matters of this kind, I think, the ignorant bird watcher has an advantage over the expert. He has more Newfoundlands to reach. He is like a bad golfer with a universe of unconquered worlds before him. There is no man whom I envy less than the ornithologist who has seen, heard, and identified every bird mentioned in an authoritative list of British birds, including the olivaceous warbler, the East Siberian meadow bunting, Hornemann’s redpoll, and the white-tailed eagle. Probably, however, there has never been such a man. I have known experienced ornithologists who had never even seen or heard a Tengmalm’s owl, that delightful whistler whom I once listened to as he sat on a roof-top near an Essex estuary.

Even when they are not rare, fortunately, birds can give us pleasure by some rarity in their behaviour. A few years ago thousands—or, at least, hundreds—of people were excited by the news that a cormorant had not only visited London but perched on the cross above the dome of St. Paul’s. To a rational eye a cormorant would be much more interesting when diving oilily after fish in the seas round Cornwall. But any cormorant might dive under the waves round Cornwall. There was only one cormorant that was ever original enough to roost on the cross of St. Paul’s. Hence he became for the moment the most interesting of all cormorants—an exception to the rule, like a fraudulent company promoter who suddenly becomes sensational ‘news.’ He was the only cormorant—or, at least, one of the very few cormorants—of whom the British

press ever took any notice. Unconventional rather than conventional behaviour is the easy way to fame.

And even a chaffinch can get into the news by appearing in unexpected places. The chaffinch—one of the commonest English birds—though it is plentiful in the suburbs, is said seldom to penetrate to the heart of London, and when a chaffinch is seen in St. James's Park you will find overjoyed ornithologists writing to the papers about it. Even a duck becomes doubly interesting when you see it swimming in one of those water tanks constructed on the site of a bombed building in Victoria Street. A duck in Victoria Street is as unexpected a sight as a nightingale in Berkeley Square—as unexpected a sight, indeed, as the yellow-wheeled hansom I saw being driven along Fleet Street the other day. If you want to excite the interest of Londoners to-day, you should ride down Piccadilly, not on a motor-cycle, but on a Victorian bicycle of the penny-farthing style.

At the same time, the appetite for rarity provides us, it seems to me, with pleasures that are superficial in comparison with the pleasure we get from common things. Rarity appeals mainly to the love of the sensational. The Taj Mahal, no doubt, is a wonderful sight to see, but it does not evoke emotions so profound as the sight of one's own cottage. Similarly, it is delightful to see for the first time the grebes in Richmond Park performing their courtship ceremonies, but how much more delightful it is to watch a common sparrow feeding her flutter-winged young, beak to beak! The sparrow has seldom had justice done to it in modern times. Yet how friendly are its quarrelsome jargonings to the human ear! And who can deny that, in the words of an eminent ornithologist, 'when clean, the cock-sparrow is an exceedingly handsome bird'? Yet all that a modern poet thought worth saying about this Adonis of the garden was: 'How I hate the sparrows, the

sparrows, the sparrows!’ The sparrow, it is true, has been celebrated in some fine verse, but this, I think, was usually the result of a misunderstanding. Some poets, like some schoolboys, call almost any bird a sparrow.

The cock chaffinch is a still handsomer bird than the sparrow, but he has had even fewer compliments paid to him by the poets. It is odd that so companionable a bird should have attracted so little affection. Companionable, perhaps is an exaggeration, but the chaffinch at least will stand on the grass and sing within a few feet of one’s deck-chair, showing none of that suspicion of mankind which is a characteristic of so many birds. His song, too, is of all bird songs the most expressive of robust-heartedness, yet the cuckoo with his two notes which, to many people, are expressive only of deception, has achieved a hundred times greater glory in literature. This may be because the cuckoo is exceptional even in his wickedness and, though not a rarity to the ear, is a comparative rarity to the eye.

This year, it seems to me, there are fewer birds in England than in the springs of the past. Were clouds of the migrants turned back, I wonder, by the tumult in the skies above North Africa? Whatever may be the reason, I have never heard so few willow wrens and chiff-chaffs in my neighbourhood in May and early June. It is said that in some districts, misunderstanding a B.B.C. broadcast, the school children have been killing all the birds within range, in the interests of agriculture. But I do not think that this has happened in my own parish. Still, with flycatchers and goldcrests in the garden, and two cock chaffinches dancing up and down in the air like midges as they fight, one cannot complain of being impoverished. And there is still a sight of the black redstart in the Temple to look forward to. I would give almost anything—except my lunch time—to have a look at him.



## XX. PENNY PARADISE

SINCE taxation and other causes have increased the price of so many things in recent years, I have noticed a wistful expression coming on the faces of some of the older generation when they begin to talk about the prices which were current in the Golden Age—or ought we to call it the Copper Age?—of their young manhood. Especially in public-houses the elderly are given to recalling the vanished cheapness of the poor man's luxuries. 'Why, bless my soul,' I heard a grey-haired publican saying the other day, 'when I first started in this business, a customer would come in and ask for a glass of beer and put down a penny. And that wasn't all he got for his penny. We kept clay pipes in stock for our customers, and, if he wanted one, he got it for nothing. And, if he wanted a box of matches, he could have that for nothing, too. All this, mind you, and all we got for it was a penny. I sometimes wonder how we made it pay, but we did.'

As one listened to him one felt that one might almost have been listening to a passage from some Utopian romance. In Utopia, as it is imagined by the best people, perhaps, the customer would have been given the beer, too, for nothing; but to get beer, a pipe, and matches for a

penny is probably as near Utopian conditions as most of us dare to conceive in our dreams.

I know an old age pensioner who has again and again said to me, when putting down his tenpence for a pint of beer: 'I remember the time when I could get this for twopence.' As he fills his pipe with tobacco, costing something in the neighbourhood of two shillings an ounce, he tells me: 'Threepence an ounce it used to cost. We'll never see that again.' He smiles a little wryly as he comments on the change. At the same time there is a certain pride in his tone, as though he wished to convey to his younger auditors how much they missed in not having been born between seventy and eighty years ago. He and his coevals have lived in Arcadia: they have drunk ale in the country of the young. His grandchildren have been born in exile from this penny paradise, and it is doubtful whether, however long they live, they will even be able to visit it.

Like the old age pensioner, I, too, can hardly help feeling that I am describing a wonderland when I tell one of the young that I once lived in a city in which a small whisky cost 2d., and a 'special' 2½d., and where 2d. was the ordinary price of a pint of porter or a bottle of Guinness. It was considered a breach of the decencies in some circles in which every penny mattered to ask for a drink that cost more than 2d. A frequently told story of the time concerned a man in a public-house who, on being asked what he would have to drink, said: 'I guess I'll have a Bass'—the price of which was 2½d.—to which the man who was treating him replied: 'Guess again, and guess bitter.' The story, I have no doubt, was founded on fact. In the hotel bars, however, where the sons of the wealthy forgathered, drinks usually cost 3d.

Cigarettes, on the other hand, were dearer in my boyhood than in later years of my youth. When I first became a secret though still only an occasional smoker, a packet of

ten cigarettes cost 6*d.*—a price which ultimately fell to 3*d.* I do not think pipe tobacco cheapened proportionately. My first pipe mixture cost me 4½*d.* an ounce, and in the strong air of the seaside I used sometimes to buy an ounce of plug or twist for 3*d.* Youths with *recherché* tastes used to pay 7*d.* an ounce for a tobacco called Old Judge, but this was regarded by most smokers as an extravagance, beyond the normal pocket.

It is a curious fact that, when men gloat over the low prices of the past, it is nearly always of the luxuries they are thinking. Economic historians are interested in the price of the two-pound loaf fifty years ago, but I have never heard it mentioned in casual conversation in an inn. Many people like myself, who do not happen to be responsible for paying household bills, could not even tell you what the two-pound loaf costs to-day. If I sat down to an examination paper in which all the questions referred to the current prices of the necessities of life, I doubt whether I could secure a single mark. I know neither what milk nor what meat costs. The price of a pound of sugar is as far outside the scope of my knowledge as the area of the Caspian Sea.

Even so, as a reader I can easily become absorbed in lists of prices. I like to learn what a chicken cost in the time of Queen Elizabeth and how much people had to pay for a pound of tea in the reign of Queen Anne. I like to know even what a pound of apples cost as recently as the Victorian nineties. Hence, it was with considerable pleasure that I read a postcard recently sent to me, on the back of which was printed a catalogue of the prices charged for a great variety of articles in Hull fifty years ago or so. The compiler of the postcard has taken his facts from the advertisements that appeared at the time in the Hull newspapers.

Some of the prices, I confess, astonish me. Take, for example, the prices of boots and shoes of all sizes in 1890:

Ladies', 1*s.* 4*d.*; beaded toes, 1*s.* 11*d.*; satin shoes, all



colours, 2s. 11d.; real morocco calf, 3s. 11d.; gents' genuine calf, all sizes, 4s. 11d.; girls' patent Oxford shoes, 2s. 6d. and 2s. 8d.

These prices seemed all the more incredible to me, since I clearly remembered going into a shop, as a schoolboy, to be measured for a pair of boots which were to cost 30s. It was the dearest shop in the town, no doubt, but I should have been surprised to hear that there was even one local shop in which I could have got boots of any kind for 4s. 11d. a pair. Most people considered that the American boots which began to be imported in great numbers a year or two later and cost 16s. 6d. a pair were marvels of cheapness.

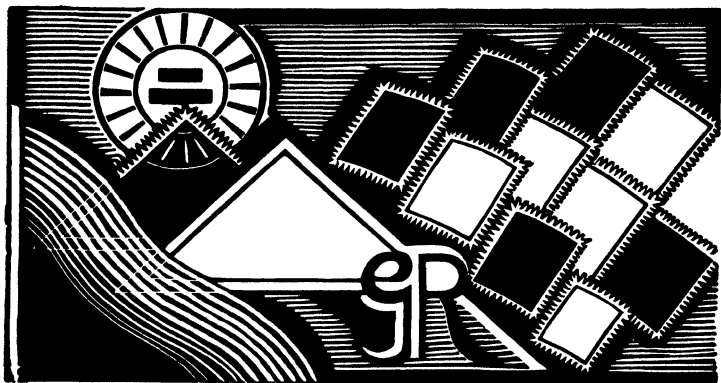
Hull, however, seems to have been a remarkably economical town in which to do one's shopping. Butterscotch, for example, was advertised at 1½d. a pound. I was, myself, a butterscotch addict, but I never paid less than 4½d. a packet for it, and that was in a shop that boasted of its popular prices. What I paid for acid drops I cannot remember; in Hull in 1897 they cost 2d. a pound. I can readily believe that a pound of dates could be bought for 1d.; as a child, I used to go into a small shop for a halfpennyworth and was given an enormous quantity for my money.

Jam, again, seems to have been exceedingly cheap at 3d. for a two-pound jar. I remember that, when I was for a time hard up at the beginning of the century, and living on bread and jam, I paid 6½d. for a three-pound pot of the cheapest jam in London and thought I was getting a bargain.

Bacon and ham I never bought, so that I cannot say whether bacon was abnormally cheap at from 2¾d. to 3½d. a pound, or ham at from 3½d. to 6d. Nor does it surprise me to hear that Australian butter costs 9½d. a pound, milk 1d. a pint, a haircut 2d., and a shave 1d. I have myself been shaved for 1½d.

Can it be, however, that all the citizens of Hull lived in this luxury of cheapness? Not all of them, I am sure, lived in two-roomed houses paying a rent of 1s. 9d. a week. A substantial minority at least must have smoked cigarettes other than those that could be bought for six a penny. It is difficult to believe that the leading merchants, even those most given to saving, were content to wear those keyless watches that cost only 2s. 11d.

The publisher of the card containing these facts gives it as a heading 'The Happy Nineties.' The adjective would be more convincing if we did not remember the price of labour in the nineties, which was often as incredible in its cheapness as butterscotch or keyless watches. I knew a powerful agricultural labourer of those days who did the main part of the work on a good-sized farm for a wage of 8s. a week, his midday dinner, and a free cottage. Women working in the fields earned 10d. a day for thinning turnips, as back-breaking a job as one could imagine. Corporation employees were paid so penuriously that they demanded a minimum wage of £1 a week, and this was resisted by many good citizens as an unwarranted extravagance. Many people in the nineties, I fancy, would have thought our earnings to-day as Utopian as we think the price of their beer and bacon. In either case the Utopia is somewhat illusory. It is true that in the year 1901 one could lunch excellently in London on roast beef and two vegetables for 6½d.; but one did not always possess 6½d. The glass of beer at 1d. was cheap, but not so cheap if you had only a few pence in your pocket. The penny paradise had its enjoyable side, but it was not an out-and-out paradise all the time. I cannot think of heaven merely as an enormous shop, out-Woolworthing Woolworths in its prices. I can look back, indeed, on those days of cheap acid drops and cheap hair-cuts without a twinge of envy.



## XXI. GRAND PASSION

PAUSING at a bookstall the other day I saw a weekly paper entitled *Stamp Collecting*; and, as I had once in a small way been a zealot in collecting stamps, a wave of nostalgia swept over me and, putting down threepence, I carried the paper off to see how far the world of a child philatelist of the eighties and early nineties had survived into the world of to-day.

Those who have never collected stamps do not realize that philately is not a hobby but a passion. What the sounding cataract was to Wordsworth, that the sight of a sheet of stamps, sent on approval, was to me as a small boy at Miss Hardy's school. To read the advertisements of the stamp-dealers in the *Boy's Own Paper* was to have dreams as dazzling as those of the men who set out to discover the Indies. There was always something unattainable, or almost so, in the wide world of stamps. No schoolboy with a few pennies in his pocket could expect to become the easy possessor of a three-cornered Cape of Good Hope. (Cape of Good Hope! The very name was a match to the

imagination.) Then there was a black—or was it a blue?—Mauritius, reputed to be even rarer than the three-cornered Cape of Good Hope. I remember a fellow schoolboy's offering to sell me one for sixpence as a bargain, but, enthusiast and simpleton though I was, I could see that his supposed rarity was merely an English penny stamp inked over to give it an appearance of antiquity. In later life he made a fortune in business.

But it was not only the rarities among stamps that excited the imagination. The long Western Australia stamps, bearing the image of a swan, were lovelier even than the coloured pictures given away with Christmas supplements. The Egyptian stamps portraying the Sphinx were common enough, but the eye dwelt on them meltingly. I felt especial pangs of love for the stamps of the West Indies and Central and South America. The name of Ecuador was music, and Guatemala and Nicaragua were its close rivals. Then there were Barbados and Montserrat. Montserrat sounded like the name of a perfect wine, and indeed, when I began to go into public-houses I asked for it several times till I found that it was the name only of a lime juice cordial.

There was scarcely such a thing, however, as a dull stamp apart from the commonest English, French, and German varieties with which the stamp dealers were so liberal in their packets of '50 stamps assorted' for a shilling and a penny.

To see a stamp that one did not possess was to be filled with a craving almost physical—a craving such as even many adults experience for the cakes at somebody else's table in a teashop. I do not know whether people steal stamps, but I can understand the temptation. Some people steal jewels—according to the writers of sensational stories—from the heads of West African idols. I should have been more likely to succumb to the English black

penny stamp. Fortunately, I gave up stamp collecting at an age at which my criminal tendencies were only half developed.

In those days one could dream of having a perfect stamp collection and of possessing all the stamps in existence since the time of the Mulready envelope. All one needed was unlimited money or the gifts of a master-thief with unrivalled opportunities. Since then stamps have become so numerous that it must be almost impossible to overtake their multiplicity. Reading the names of the varieties offered for sale by the advertisers in *Stamp Collecting*, I felt like the aesthete who had dined too well and who, as he looked at the stars in the night sky on the way home, murmured: 'There are too many of them.' A Victorian does not feel at ease in a world in which a stamp collector is enticed to buy with such announcements as 'Coronations. Rising Rapidly! Buy now! Save money!' and is offered something called 'Coronation sets' issued by Basutoland, the Falkland Islands, Nauru, Nyasaland, and the Virgin Islands. We had no Coronation sets in our days. Stamps were there for letters, not for occasions.

To-day, however, the stamp of occasion, once rare, seems to have become the rule. We read, for example:

'The Allied occupation of *Iceland* has given fresh impetus to the demand for this by no means unpopular country. The air stamps in particular are worth watching, and the fine used copies should be picked up "at best." I also fancy S.G. Nos. 307-10, 311, and 312-14.'

After this we are told, as though we were getting a tip for a horse race:

'*Liberia* is not every one's "cup of tea," but for those who are interested in this somewhat despised country, the last commemorative (set Nos. 358-60) should be attractive, in fine used condition.'

When I was a stamp collector every stamp was everybody's 'cup of tea,' and there was no such thing as a 'despised country.' The collector's attitude to stamps seems to have turned topsy-turvy in the last fifty years.

As a child I should not have understood such an announcement as that made under the heading 'Recent Realizations':

'Great Britain, Edinburgh and Leith, official		£	s.	d.
notices and a rouletted ( $\frac{1}{4}$ d.) black used on				
cover	.	.	.	.
			6	10 0
London Circular Delivery Co., official notices				
and a $\frac{1}{4}$ d. blue imperf.				
	.	.	3	0 0
Metropolitan, $\frac{1}{4}$ d. rose (pinholed) on entire				
cover	.	.	6	6 0

This puzzles me even to-day. I think I must have collected stamps at a time before stamp collecting had become scientific.

Possibly there was always a science of philately. I have just learned from the *New English Dictionary* that the word is an old one, and was first 'proposed by M. Herpin, a postage-stamp collector, in *Le Collectionneur de Timbres Postes* (15th November 1864).' The derivation, it is stated, is from the Greek *philo-* and *ateleia* (meaning exemption from payment); and the dictionary elaborates on this: 'When a letter was carriage free or carriage prepaid by the sender, it was formerly in various countries stamped FREE or FRANCO; the fact is now indicated by the letter bearing an impressed receipt stamp, or its substitute an adhesive label commonly called a postage stamp, for the amount.' How incurious one is, never for fifty years to have asked oneself what was the origin of the word philately! Perhaps one's instinct told one that it was not a very good word. As long ago as 1881 the *Athenaeum*, quoted in the dictionary, wrote: 'It is possibly a question whether the science should properly be called philately or

timbrophily.' And I feel that the stamp collecting in which I myself indulged could be more accurately described as timbrophily.

The true philatelist, indeed, would never have been content with such a modest timbrophilic collection as mine, with its half-sized early Victorian halfpenny stamps and its cheap treasures from Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast.

Even King George V, who was a Victorian like myself, seems to have been more of a philatelist than a timbrophile. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

'The king has a great range of rare specimens, original sketches, proofs, etc., including the unissued 2d. Tyrian plum, King Edward, and stamps over-printed for use of Government departments such as "I.R. Official" 1902-4, 6d. dull purple, 5s. carmine, 10s. ultramarine, and £1 green, and "Board of Education" 1s. green and carmine, in singles and in pairs.'

Even in my most ambitious dreams I should never have aimed at including in my collection 'Board of Education' 1s. green and carmine in singles and pairs. Newfoundland was good enough for me, or Spain with the head of the boy king.

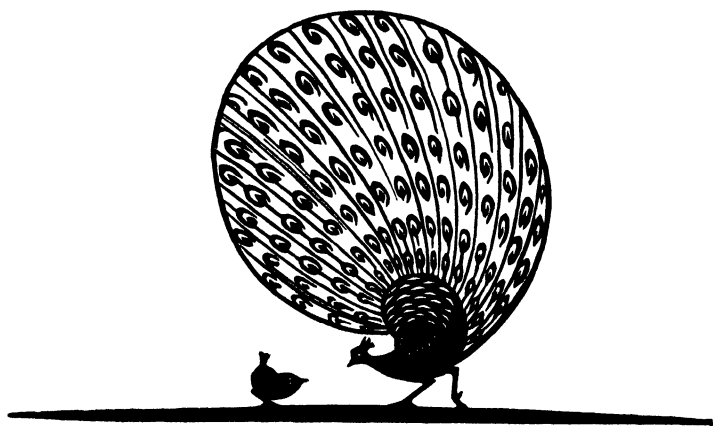
Science, however, is always spreading its borders, and philately has never been content to keep within the old geographical frontiers. Explorers go in search of new rarities, like botanists in quest of new plants. How the philatelist's heart rises as he reads of the 'so-called "Reprints"' of contemporary British Colonial stamps that are now making their appearance! These, it seems, have the virtue of novelty, since they are printed on 'thinner and whiter paper (through which the watermark shows clearly on the back)' and are provided with 'a purer and whiter gum than has been hitherto used.' Other important changes are shown in the illustrations of the reprints published in *Stamp Collecting*:

‘Reference to the illustrations accompanying these notes will reveal that a new dandy-roll must have been brought into use in connection with the making of thinner paper. This is proved by a comparison of the shape of the letters C.A. ; in the original type one leg of the letter “A” has a decided inward curve, whereas on the new dandy-roll both legs are symmetrical.’

As I read sentences like these I cannot help feeling that I was never more than an amateur, a preparatory schoolboy, of stamp collecting. I can have experienced only a calf-love for it.

Not like these modern philatelists who are wedded to it for life—for better or for worse—the crown, surely, of a grand passion.





## XXII. ON AUSTERITY

MANY people have commented in recent years on the English genius for understatement. It seems to me, however, that the English have also a genius for overstatement. As proof of this I rely on the single instance of their war-time use of the word 'austerity.' Not even Goering when he warned the Germans to be austere in their attitude to butter can have dreamed that a great nation would one day regard it as a mark of austerity to wear a pair of trousers with no turn-ups or a waistcoat gashed with fewer than four pockets. After all, the dandies of the Temple and Gray's Inn have been wearing trousers with no turn-ups for years with no sense of hardship; and dukes and marquises lived luxuriously in ages when there were no waistcoats with four pockets and, indeed, when there were no waistcoats at all.

Why, then, did the modern Englishman, in the middle of a world catastrophe, decide to regard himself as a particular victim of fate because he was no longer able to buy

turned-up trousers? There were so many other things that made his life poorer—restaurants in which the food was with luck just eatable, deprivation of careless holidays, the disappearance of bananas, worse and worse and dearer and dearer cigarettes, the end of the motor-car as an instrument of pleasure, the absence of light in the streets, the prohibition of the recklessly and rightly used coal scuttle. All these things brought austerity into our lives. Yet, by an extraordinary misuse of language, the use of the word ‘austerity’ has been reserved by the Government and the press for the supposed sufferings (now to be abolished) of men, in not being allowed to buy turned-up trousers.

I looked up the word ‘austerity’ in the dictionary because I had been told that it was derived from ‘Auster,’ the south wind, said to be obnoxious at certain times of the year to the Romans. The Oxford Dictionary does not support this derivation. On the contrary, it relates ‘austere’ to the Greek word *austeros*, meaning ‘making the tongue dry and rough, hence harsh, severe.’ Gradually it came to mean ‘severe in self-discipline or self-restraint, stringently moral, strict, abstinent.’ But can I be called severe in self-discipline or stringently moral merely because I wear a waistcoat with fewer than four pockets? Not according to any standards that I was brought up in. The stringently moral man of my childhood had to give his mind to more important things than the number of his waistcoat pockets. Austerity in those days was not always so extreme as that referred to in Macaulay’s sentence: ‘To these austere fanatics a holiday was an object of positive disgust.’ But it was above tailoring matters. An austere man was a man who frowned on half the pleasures of life and from the highest possible motives tried to blight these pleasures for others.

Not that the Puritans among whom I grew up were pleasure-haters. Certainly they were lovers of the heaped

table—not gluttons, but lavish with jams to the young, royal offerers of second and even third helpings, making up with cakes for what their households lacked in ale. Sunday, no doubt, was an austere day. Even the *habitués* of the Sunday public-houses threatened to go out—after the morning closing time—and create a riot if any attempt were made to introduce band-music into the chief park of the city on the sabbath day. In a public-house one Sunday the very bona-fide travellers marched out as one man to beat up two teams who were breaking the sabbath by playing a game of hurling. It will be seen from this that the conception of austerity differs considerably even among Puritans. The sabbatarian drinker is austere in one way, the sabbatarian teetotaller in another. The austerity of some elders forbade the theatre, but not the circus. The austerity of others more logically forbade even the circus. But there were nearly always loopholes of escape. The normal puritan of the nineteenth century was seldom a Mr. Murdstone. Abundance of food, abundance of amusements, abundance of holidays, abundance of company young and old—these, it seems to me, were among the chief characteristics of Victorian puritanism.

Still, even then one heard of semi-Mr. Murdstones—men who reprov'd their children if they came down unpunctually to the eight o'clock breakfast, men who did not believe it was right for children to have both jam and butter on the same slice of bread, men who tried to compel their children to work hard at school. They were of the type of the austere man in the parable of the talents who so terrified the most nervous of his three servants that he could think of nothing to do with his talent but to hide it in a napkin. I do not think the case for the man with the single talent has ever been fairly stated. Read the story in St. Luke and you will see that he was simply a victim of austerity suffering from inhibitions.

To-day austerity comes to us not as a harsh master, but as a gentle and benevolent companion. Never were such hardships imposed on a community with so little sign of bullying. It may be an iron hand that withholds our olive oil, but it wears a velvet glove. It is strange to live in a world without cream, but there is no malice in the prohibition. The lemon has become a fruit of the kind that Dr. Faustus dreamed of, but its absence causes no resentment even among fanatical believers in the lemon cure. There was a time when the City man would have thought himself harshly treated if he had not been able to go into any restaurant and be sure of getting a chop or a steak for lunch. To-day, with no face of bitterness, he will sit down to a plate of minced veal. There was a time when I should have thought I was being austere if I ate cod; now, cod seems to me to be second cousin to the Dover sole. All our standards of austerity have collapsed. I find myself acquiring a taste for cabbage. Gourmets may dream of their seven-course dinners; give me a slice or two of spam, with a few pickles to hide the flavour, and a boiled pudding, and I do not complain.

A new form of austerity threatens wartime Britain in the suggestion that the use of table-cloths and napkins should be forbidden in hotels and restaurants. The manager of one of the great hotels summed up his objections to the proposal in the pithy sentence: 'It would be bad for morale.' Strange that austerity, which the ancient Stoics thought to be the very foundation of strength of character, should now be regarded as a force that undermines it. One can see Colonel Blimp's faith in the future of his country sagging as, for the first time in his life, he sits down to dinner without a napkin on his knees. 'First, trousers without turn-ups. Now, no table-napkins. What next, I wonder? This is a victory for Hitler.' Yet outside the

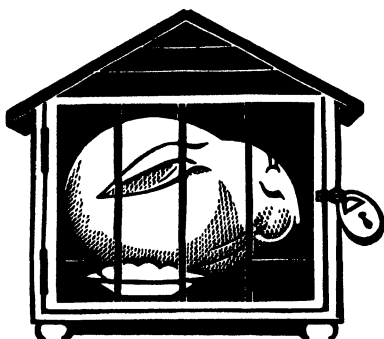
West End good men—men of strong fibre—have preserved their character in the past in surroundings naked of table-linen. When I came to London first, I sometimes dined in eating-houses which announced 'Roast beef and two veg. 6d.' and 'Everything as nice as mother makes it'; and we were not given even salt spoons at table. We dug out the salt from the cellar with the point of the knife. Yet I never noticed any signs of failure of morale on the part of my fellow diners. They seemed morally as sound as members of the House of Lords. Perhaps austerity does not undermine your morale if you do not know you are being austere.

The word 'austerity,' indeed, has a mainly relative meaning. There were medieval saints who felt that they were being austere in not taking a bath. There have been modern boys who felt that they were being austere in taking a bath. Even churchgoing, which is a luxury to those who like it, is a form of austerity to those who go against their will. Dinner parties, which give pleasure to most people, are a penance to others. Children even—though not many of them—differ as to whether tapioca pudding is a diet of austerity or not. To me fresh air is a luxury; to my neighbour it is harsher than the chill of a monastic cell.

I suggest then that 'austerity' is rather an absurd word to use for any of the restrictions that have been imposed on us since the beginning of the war. Those who grumble are gross exaggerators of minor troubles—like the Belfast secondhand furniture dealer who, finding himself marooned in a Dublin hotel by the insurrection of 1916, wrote in his diary on the third day: 'No butter for breakfast again to-day. How long, O Lord, how long?' The fact is, the small rather than the large amount of austerity that has become part of our lives is the surprising characteristic of England in wartime. A nation whose face falls at the thought of

having to wear trousers without turn-ups or of having to dine in restaurants without table napkins cannot have much to grumble about. Let us hope that we shall not have something more worth grumbling about later on. If we do, however, I cannot help thinking that we shall grumble less.





### XXIII. FREE

MANY curious punishments have been devised by mankind, but few more curious than that which was recently imposed on a slave by the Sultan of Mukalla in southern Arabia. According to *The Times*, the sultan, in the course of a tour, warned his subjects against repeating enemy propaganda and announced that offenders would be punished by flogging and deportation. Apparently he altered his mind, however, having thought of an even more daunting punishment—at least when the guilty person was a slave. ‘A slave,’ *The Times* tells us, ‘who had been a ringleader in spreading defeatist rumours was compulsorily freed (from slavery) by the sultan. This unusual punishment,’ adds the correspondent, ‘results in the offender becoming poorer by eighty rupees a month.’

We in the West have so long taken it for granted that human beings like to be free that it comes as a surprise to us to read of a country in which a slave regards freedom much as Adam regarded his exile from Eden. We think of slaves as caged wild birds longing to escape into the liberties of the air. Yet we should reflect that, even among caged birds, there are some that, if the cage door were left

open, would make no effort to escape, but would voluntarily remain on the perches of servitude. I have read of a man who kept goldfinches in a cage and who let them out regularly in his garden, and it was said that, after flying about for a little, they always came back to the comforts of the cage. The goldfinch in the cage is in the position of a rich and idle man, with servants to bring him food in abundance. Like the dog, he is his master's master. The goldfinch in the trees, on the other hand, has to work for his living among the thistles and the groundsel with no prospect of ever, till the end of his life, achieving a shorter working day. He enjoys greater personal freedom than the caged goldfinch, but it might be argued with some show of reason that the caged goldfinch enjoys greater economic freedom.

I do not, I may say, put this forward as a defence either of the caging of birds or of slavery; I offer it merely as an explanation of the melancholy feelings of the slave who was set free by the order of the Sultan of Mukalla. With us in this climate the desire for freedom has become second nature. It begins to manifest itself in the nursery, where the infant rebels against the restraints imposed on its voracious or destructive appetites. Who is there who has never revolted against slavery while being taken for a walk by a nurse who insisted on holding him by the hand? The resentment against calls to pull up one's stockings or to tie a flapping shoe-lace is another early mark of a freedom-loving personality. I myself, as a child, felt like a slave under the restrictions of Sunday. Not that I wished to break the sabbath, for I believed that the man in the moon had been put there as a punishment for gathering sticks on Sunday, and I had no desire to share his fate. But I saw no reason why I should be forbidden to run instead of walking on the sabbath day or to accept sweets from a peppermint-sucking elder in church; and, when I was in the country, it roused my sullen opposition to be told that because it was



Sunday I must not go into the garden to eat gooseberries from the bushes. Compulsory Sunday school I also regarded as an unnatural form of slavery. Church I enjoyed: the crowd in sabbatical dress, the readings, the singing, the sermon, attracted the eye and ear; but Sunday school was a dreary imitation of everyday school, though I used to get some pleasure from watching a boy in the class who had a gift for forming bubbles on the tip of his tongue and blowing them off into the air. Even with this compensation, however, I would much rather have been allowed to stay at home and read about missionaries. It was a little after this, when I was put into a bowler hat and expected to wear gloves on the way to church, that the slavery of Sunday seemed to me to be almost unbearable.

The problem of freedom is not, as any one will admit, a simple one. Many years ago Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, speaking on the Irish question, said rather profoundly that it was not enough that men should be free, but that they must also be made to feel free. At that time Irishmen certainly enjoyed what to a modern German would seem an enormous amount of freedom. They had freedom of speech to such a point that any Irishman could advocate the establishment of a republic; they had freedom of election; they had freedom of movement, not only in their own country, but all over the world; they were free to talk what is called treason in their homes with no Gestapo listening at the keyhole. Yet somehow, though they enjoyed a great deal of individual freedom, they did not feel free because what they most longed for was national freedom. It was thought for a time that they would begin to feel free if they were released from the domination of landlords, but they happened to have set their hearts on another kind of freedom, like the suffragettes, who later identified freedom with the right to vote at parliamentary elections. We all feel enslaved if we have not the particular kind of

freedom we want. Other people can never understand this. They think that we are unreasonable and that the freedom of which we dream is no better than a mirage; but in the meantime we are like the child in the Victorian advertisement trying to reach the soap that has fallen outside the bath. The older generation will remember the picture of the squalling child and the inscription beneath it: 'He won't be happy till he gets it.' But will he be happy then? Who knows?

One of the most difficult things to make up our minds about is in what freedom consists. I once met a woman who, having been left with a fortune, said that she would never feel free till she had got rid of her property. Possessions, she maintained, made one a slave, and one became their servant and not their master; and the only hope of recovering one's liberty was to disburden oneself of them somehow or other and to live a propertyless life, like Thoreau or an Indian saint. Much as I once loved Thoreau, I confess I have never looked on money as a cause of enslavement. I have always felt freer when I had a pound than when I had only a shilling in my pocket. To be able to take a taxi instead of a bus is to me a desirable kind of freedom. To be able to stand someone a lunch and not to have to worry about whether one has enough money in one's pocket to pay for the dishes and the drinks that one has pressed him—too successfully—to take—that, too, is one of the freedoms after which many a poor man must have often aspired. At the same time, I can understand how an angelic egotist may achieve freedom simply by cutting down his desires and never standing anybody lunch. To free oneself from care about food, care about comfort, care about hospitality, care about all the normal pleasures of life, is one method of attaining spiritual liberty. But I wonder whether the man who attains it in this way is not a slave to an illusion.

The slave to puritanism is—or used to be—as common almost as, say, the slave to tobacco. Neither of them was ever entirely free. The question is which is the nobler form of slavery. I should vote for the puritan and go on smoking.

The truth is there is, as usual, much to be said on both sides of the question. The human being who can live happily without various things is undoubtedly free from the desire for these things, but may it not be that he is also free from the desire for liberty? Who, for example, would say that the Victorian woman who was perfectly happy without a parliamentary vote had solved the problem of freedom better than Mrs. Pankhurst and the suffragettes? The love of liberty has more often led men to increase their wants than to diminish them. Men who care for freedom have, throughout the ages, fought for their rights, and no one has ever been able to persuade them that it was a matter of no consequence to sensible men whether they won their rights or not. The history of the human race does not bear out the theory that

Stone walls do not a prison make,  
Nor iron bars a cage.

A philosopher with a free mind may make the best of things by telling himself while in a dungeon:

If I have freedom in my love,  
And in my soul am free,  
Angels alone, that soar above,  
Enjoy such liberty.

But this is merely the defiance of a gallant spirit. Not even the most silver-tongued chaplains in the Bastille on the eve of the French Revolution could have convinced the prisoners that, if Althea came whispering at the gates, they would be the rivals in happiness of the angels. I doubt

whether the whispers of Althea would be a cure for claustrophobia.

And even the philosopher who can himself enjoy a measure of freedom in the confines of a gaol would not contend that men inside gaols ought to feel as free as those outside. Good men have often defended both gaols and slavery, but on the whole, they have laboured to release other good men—and even ordinary men—from the restraints of both. The bird that lights up the poet's imagination is seldom a caged bird. Nor has there ever been a hero in literature who preferred being in gaol to being free. Thoreau maintained that in certain circumstances the only place for an honest man to be in was a gaol. But he never wrote a defence of gaols as good things in themselves. They were to him merely a stage for the fight against slavery. He accepted them in the same spirit in which Regulus accepted martyrdom.

I am inclined to think that slavery is no more desirable than imprisonment, though a slave who makes money out of his slavery might not agree. He might argue that a slave with money is freer at least than a free man who is poor, and that is a point of view that might appeal to some modern theorists. It is an opinion that is obviously held both by the rich and by the poor in Mukalla. Even so, as an old-fashioned disciple of Wilberforce, I should feel inclined to congratulate the unhappy wretch whom the sultan has lately sentenced to freedom for the term of his natural life.



#### XXIV. DISAPPOINTED

LIFE, some wise man has said, consists of one disappointment after another. Every baby is apparently disappointed with its first view of the planet called Earth, for, if it is healthy at the time of its birth, it utters a loud cry of disapprobation. As it grows older it is frequently disappointed with its food and with its toys. One of the first instincts of every baby seems to be to throw its toys, one after the other, over the side of the perambulator. Why should it do this, if it were contented? How often have I spent a sunny afternoon picking up rubber dolls, swans, coloured bricks, and ivory-handled bells from the grass, because an infant with the passion for perfection had pushed them over the edge as something not good enough for a descendant of our first, our once perfect, parents!

Not that my own memories of early childhood are memories of misery. Memory, as a rule, is an optimist, if one can use such a word about one's experiences in the past, and makes light of bygone gloom. So far as I can remember, the first disappointment I ever experienced in an acute form was with the behaviour of Adam and Eve

in the Garden of Eden—behaviour that I even then knew, though not in the speech of Milton, brought death into the world and all our woe. Night after night I lay awake thinking bitter thoughts of a grown-up man and woman who could not resist the temptation to eat an apple, though they knew it was the end of paradise on earth, not only for themselves, but for everybody for all time to come, including my grandmother, my family, and me. I was fond of apples myself—especially of the Newtown pippins that arrived in a barrel every Christmas—but I felt that I would have abstained from apples for a lifetime rather than allow my greed to lead to the death of a single human being. I may have been a little self-righteous, not having met the serpent at the time; but, as my tears flowed in the darkness, I was certainly disappointed that Adam and Eve had not behaved as well as I thought I should have done in the same circumstances. Has any one ever really liked Adam and Eve? Even to-day, they, rather than Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, seem to be symbols of something eternally disappointing in human nature.

The next serious disappointment with which I was faced was in the matter of birthday and Christmas presents. These were all very well in nursery days, when I was given the horses that were my heart's desire; but, as I grew old enough to be given books, how often I was given the wrong book! The heart always sinks on being given the wrong present. I have seen an elderly civil servant, who had been bearded for thirty years, wearing a very long face when one of his oldest female relations presented him with a shaving set on Christmas morning, saying, as she did so: 'You shave, don't you?' On a child, getting the wrong book, the effect is still more disheartening. And book prizes at school can be even more depressing than books given as presents by one's relations. One of the first prizes I was awarded, I remember, was a beautifully bound

book called *Our Public Schools*, a book about Eton and Harrow and such places, high-minded, I am sure—I never read it—but with no invitation in it for a schoolboy lover of stories and Rugby football. My next prize was an equally beautifully bound copy of Darwin's *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Agency of Worms*. I have been told that this is a masterpiece, but not, I am sure, for a boy of thirteen.

After that, one disappointment followed another. I was disappointed to find that I had no gift for games. I won them in day-dreams, but on the grass of reality I was little better than a burden to any side. As an addict of fairy tales I was also disappointed never to find riches descending on me in a miraculous shower, enabling me to live happily and without labour ever after. Such disappointments are, luckily, not heartbreaking. Even a small boy learns to resign himself not in entire cheerlessness to the second best. If he cannot play games himself, he can venerate those who can. If fortune never comes to him in golden abundance a second cousin may turn up with the gift of half a crown.

Possibly, if we got all we dreamed of, we should be still more disappointed than we are by our failure to get it. I, for example, longed for years to go to Rome; but, when at last I went to Rome, and drove through its streets, I wondered whether it was worth while going so far to see a city so unworthy of its history. The disappointment, I may say, did not last; but famous spectacles do not always arouse at first sight the emotions we expected them to arouse. People used to think that Oscar Wilde was rather amusing when he said that he was disappointed in the Atlantic Ocean. To me this seems to be a straightforward confession of a disappointment that must have been experienced by thousands of people. The Atlantic Ocean to my mind looks its best from the shore; but, even when it is

seen from the shore for the first time by someone who has lived till manhood in an inland county, it does not always come up to expectations. Its very bigness is against it. It is easier to see the charm of little Lake Louise in the Rocky Mountains at a first glance than to drink in the vast beauty of the Atlantic. I, for one, have never been disappointed in a hill, but have often been disappointed in a mountain. I cannot imagine how any one could be disappointed in a first sight of Box Hill, but I can imagine without difficulty how almost any one might be disappointed in Everest. Mountains are undoubtedly impressive. But they have a kind of awful monotony that makes people like myself feel inimical to their beauty. I like reading about mountains, but, outside books, I prefer the pleasures of the plain.

Excessive fame in itself is, perhaps, an enemy of instant appreciation. Even to-day, in spite of Dr. Johnson's warning, there are people who are disappointed in the Giant's Causeway. It is a scene of rock and cliff and sea that, but for its prominence in the guide-books, would entrance any sightseer. The headland shapes, the blue ocean with gannets, white as whitewashed cottages, diving into it—these alone, quite apart from its geological curiosity, make it one of the choice places of the earth. But, even so, it is not so wonderful as the visitor expects it to be. Few of the famous sights of the world are. In regard to nothing else is it more nearly true to say that blessed is he who expects little, for he will not be disappointed?

These reflections, I may confess, had their origins in a contemporary disappointment of my own—disappointment with the recent spring. Here we have a season, praised by all the poets, and if all they write of it is true, we should year after year live through it as happily as children at their first party. Yet again and again spring betrays us, and, in spite of our knowing this, again and again we look forward to spring as a prodigal season of colour and song, with the



sun shining by day and the moon by night—of days and nights so magical that it seems a sin to sit for an unnecessary moment in the house or, indeed, to go to bed. Year after year, this dream fails to come true. In most years we are lucky if there are two moonlit nights so calm and mild that it is more of a pleasure than a hardship to be out of doors listening to the nightingale. This early May there were two such nights. I did not go out, but I saw them and listened to them through a bedroom window. The next night came the wind and the cold and cloudy skies that had not even the virtue of raining. Winter had returned, and life without fires and overcoats and eiderdowns became intolerable. The fruits of the earth were stillborn, the infant vegetables blighted. No multitude of bluebells could banish the depression. The chaffinch, boldest of the birds, sang his 'rollicking song,' as it has been called, but the heart did not rollick.

There must have been many springs as niggardly of springlike delights in the experience of us sexagenarians; but somehow we are always disappointed when spring fails to be the perfect spring of the poets and dreamers. Memory, like art, is a selector of beautiful and charming things, and deceives us into believing that the springs of the past gave us almost uniformly a world of painted fields and choirs in the all but motionless trees. I can recall clearly no bad spring from my childhood and very few bad springs even in the last twenty years. The good days have blotted out the bad. One nightingale heard on a perfect day—one kingfisher with its brood diving into the stream on one sun-spangled afternoon—one wash of bluebells in a roadside wood to an accompaniment of sunshine and children's voices—these, and not chilling winds and stunted flowers and ruined fruit crops, survive in the memory. The rest has disappeared like weeds consumed in a bonfire. We forget the disappointments and remember only the

delights. Life in retrospect is, to our great good fortune, often better than life as it actually was.

For myself I ask little of spring. I ask only that it will be warm enough to enable me to sit comfortably in a garden—that the chaffinches, the flycatchers, and the whitethroat will return—that there will be a week of shining weather while the apple-trees are in blossom—that there will be a spell of clear moonlight nights—and that the world will be full of butterflies, not all of them white. This early May three-quarters of these things were denied to me. Day after day broke so icily and continued so draughtily that, had it not been for necessity, I should seldom have ventured into the open air. This was certainly not the spring of which we read in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. It was winter in a simulacrum of spring's garment. No book that I was given in my boyhood ever disappointed me more than this. No doubt, twelve months hence I shall have forgotten the worst. Memory, that backward-looking optimist, will have been at work, and I shall remember chiefly the nightingale, the swallows, and the lilacs. Thus shall I prepare myself for fresh disappointments, and there is a reasonably good chance that I shall get them.





## XXV. PLEASURES OF CREDULITY

How many of our pleasures we owe throughout life to credulity! We begin with such figments as Father Christmas and his descent of the chimney. To have been a rationalist at the age of four would have been like having been born tone-deaf or colour-blind—incapable of visiting the territory of the miraculous. In our nurseries we believe in Jack the Giant-killer long before we believe in William the Conqueror, and accept Cinderella, her fairy godmother, her coach, and her glass slipper as pieces of an admirably ordered universe. Perhaps, at the age at which we begin to read fairy tales, we have already become half-sceptics, and, if pressed on the point, might admit that we do not quite believe that the events related in the stories ever happened. Even so, we remain boundlessly credulous as we read. With a book of fairy tales in our hands, we no more think of doubting the truth of *Beauty and the Beast* than we should think of doubting that a thunderstorm meant that God was angry, or that you could catch a swallow by putting salt on the end of its tail. (I speak, of course, of the children of an earlier era whose credulities differed from the credulities of to-day.)

As we grow older, however, we still cling to the pleasures of credulity. Much of the popular fiction of the nineteenth century owed its vogue to the genius of the novelists in imposing on the credulity of their readers. Happy endings were the sweetmeats of the age. In penny novelettes dukes in disguise wooed and won girls of humble station and lived happily ever after. Impossible heroes performed impossible feats, like that godlike guardsman in Ouida's *Under Two Flags* who could sit up gambling all night, manhandle a powerful cad the next morning, and then, cool as a cucumber, ride his horse to victory in a steeplechase. It is nearly three-quarters of a lifetime since I read *Under Two Flags*, but I still remember the exquisite pleasure of wallowing in credulity as I followed the fortunes of that young hero, possessing almost all the worldly gifts worth having and sacrificing them all rather than that a woman's good name should suffer. Perhaps Ouida's plot is just as credible as that of the *Odyssey*. A large part of the pleasures of the imagination in all ages can be attributed to our credulity about the incredible.

How strong is the will to believe is shown in the extraordinary stories related throughout the ages even by the most learned of men. I picked up a volume of Pliny's *Natural History* in the Loeb Library the other day, and, as I turned over the pages, it struck me that here was a man of science who was almost as credulous as I myself used to be in the nursery in Elmwood Avenue. As he approaches the description of some of the more fantastic races of mankind—the sort of people whose heads grow beneath their shoulders—he even warns the readers against excessive incredulity. 'For who,' he asks, 'ever believed in the Ethiopians before actually seeing them? Or what is not deemed miraculous when first it comes into knowledge? How many things are judged impossible before they occur?' From this, he goes on to describe, as a modern journalist

might describe the jet-propelled aeroplane or some other new wonder, tribes of human beings in whose existence I should have thought it impossible that any man of science could ever have believed. For example: 'In a certain large valley in the Himalayas there is a region called Abarimon where are some people dwelling in forests who have their feet turned backward behind their legs, who run extremely fast and range abroad over the country with the wild animals.'

I can believe rather more easily in the Arimaspi, who have only one eye in the centre of the forehead, and who 'wage continual war around their mines with griffins, a kind of wild beast with wings, as commonly reported, that digs gold out of mines, which the creatures guard and the Arimaspi try to take from them, both with remarkable covetousness,' or in certain women of Scythia whose distinguishing marks were 'a double pupil in one eye and the likeness of a horse in the other'; but I find it hard to believe in the Astomi tribe (living near the source of the Ganges) who have 'no mouth and a body hairy all over; they dress in cotton wool, and live only on the air they breathe and the scent they inhale through their nostrils; they have no food or drink except the different odours of the roots and flowers and wild apples which they carry with them on their longer journeys so as not to lack a supply of meat.' It may be, of course, that a member of the Astomi tribe would be incredulous if he were told that there were people dwelling near the mouth of the Thames who live as modern Londoners do. Even the habit of puffing smoke out of the mouth must seem odd to a distant stranger who has only heard of it.

Let us then not be over-sceptical. After all, few of us have the brains of Pliny, and he apparently was able to believe in the existence of a tribe of men called the Monocoli 'who have only one leg and who move in jumps with surprising speed.' And, to give a little further colour

to his story, he adds: 'The same are called the Umbrella-foot tribe, because in the hotter weather they lie on their backs on the ground and protect themselves with the shadow of their feet.' Why doubt this any more than we doubt that Caesar 'used to write or read and dictate or listen simultaneously, and to dictate to his secretaries four letters at once on his important affairs—and, if otherwise unoccupied, seven letters at once'? Pliny makes both statements, and Pliny writes with some authority. Fortunately, credulity can never die. How eagerly in our own time the world—and not only the unlearned world—drank in the strange stories of Louis de Rougemont!

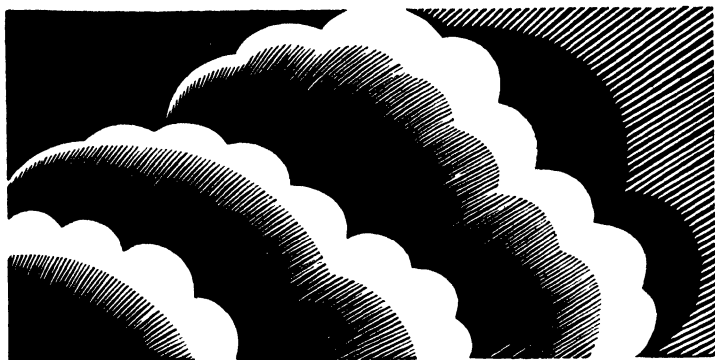
After such extraordinary examples of credulity about the world in which he had so extensively travelled, it seems odd that Pliny should become completely incredulous when he discusses the possible existence of another world—an after-life—in which beings no stranger than the members of the Umbrella-foot tribe live for ever. He can believe almost anything about the remote parts of the earth, and one would have imagined that he ought to be able to believe still more easily in the wonders of the undiscovered country variously described by the religions of mankind. At the thought of a future life, however, he becomes a pure sceptic. 'All men,' he declares boldly, 'are in the same state from their last day onward as they were before their first day, and neither body nor mind possesses any sensation after death any more than it did before birth,' and he scoffs at the vanity that makes 'a god of one who has already ceased to be a man—just as if man's mode of breathing were in any way different from that of the other animals.'

He appears, indeed, to have had a Swinburnian passion for death as the end of all things. Sudden death he describes as 'life's supreme happiness,' giving as examples of men with happy endings the two Caesars who died while putting their shoes on in the morning, Gnaeus Baebius

Pamphilius who died just after asking his footman the time, Aulus Manlius Torquatus who died while helping himself to cake at dinner, and Appius Saufeius, who died 'sucking an egg after coming back from the bath-house.'

With these examples in his mind, Pliny becomes impatient of the suggestion that a man who had enjoyed the supreme felicity of dying while sucking an egg on his way back from the bath-house should have to start life all over again in another world. 'Plague take it,' he writes, 'what is this mad idea that life is renewed by death? What repose are the generations to have if the soul retains permanent sensation in the upper world and the ghost in the lower? Assuredly, this sweet but credulous fancy ruins nature's chief blessing, death.'

On this matter, I confess, Pliny and I are poles apart. Credulous though I am about this world I am still more credulous about the other one. Not, perhaps, about its accoutrements—golden pavements, harps, wings, and so forth—but about its existence. I can believe almost anything except that the universe came into existence as the result of a fortuitous concourse of atoms. That man should be immortal does not seem to me a very odd possibility in a mysterious universe, and, from the point of view of pure reason, there seems to me to be no more to be said for disbelieving it than for believing it. The truth is, whatever we believe about man's state after death, we are bound to be a little credulous—credulously believing either that at death life is blown out like a candle or that, though the body dies, the soul survives. Different ages have different forms of credulity—in one age it is called faith, in another it is called rationalism. In any case we who know so little are bound to be credulous about many things. Man without credulity, surely, would lose not only much of his happiness, but much of his mental and imaginative vitality.



## XXVI. SILVER LINING

DURING a recent spell of mild, sunny weather, it was interesting to listen to the comments of one's neighbours. Or perhaps I should say the comment, for every one I met said more or less the same thing. 'Lovely day, isn't it?' said the inn-keeper; 'I expect we shall pay for this later.' 'Marvellous weather for the time of year,' said the railway porter; 'I expect we shall pay for this later.' 'It's more like spring than winter,' said the farmer. 'I don't like to see the grass growing in December. We're sure to have to pay for this later.'

Thus, in what might be described as a December abloom with roses, did the mass of Englishmen greet their good fortune. I could not help wondering how it is that Englishmen, who bear adversity so well, receive such a blessing as unexpected fine weather so ungraciously. How gloomy is their ancient proverb: 'A green Christmas means a full churchyard.' This proverb, it is said in mitigation, was originally put about when Christmas Day fell in a part of the year that is now January. Yet men go on repeating it in every December in which, at the approach of Christmas, England reveals herself as the green and pleasant land of the



poet's dream. Most of us secretly prefer a green Christmas. Who, except a child or those grown-up children who go ski-ing and skating, would not? A white Christmas is ideal on a Christmas card, which does not communicate the cold it illustrates. But for practical purposes a fine temperate sunny day is the best kind of day in any season of the year.

The Englishman's suspicious attitude to good weather may be the result of a puritanical distrust of pleasure. He is a Stoic who is afraid of becoming soft under gentle skies, and who is temperamentally inclined, like Rabbi Ben Ezra, to

Welcome each rebuff  
That turns earth's smoothness rough.

He becomes an optimist only when the frost is most numbing, saying: 'This will do the ground good.' The countryman, as he walks home under a thunder-plump which wets him to the skin, says: 'This is just what we needed.' A day of vile clouds gives him a chance to cheer himself with the unproved statement that 'every cloud has a silver lining.' I doubt whether he would like a rainbow so ungrudgingly as he does were it not for the fact that rainbows appear on wet days. If rainbows appeared on days of blue and gold I suspect he would have found some reason for regarding them as omens of misfortune.

One of my friends maintains that the widespread reluctance to admit that good weather, whenever it occurs, is an entirely good thing is simply one manifestation of the common fear of good luck. How common this is is shown in the proverb: 'Lucky in cards, unlucky in love.' I doubt whether there is any statistical evidence of the truth of this statement; but men seem always to have had an uneasy feeling that unusual good luck must have an attendant evil—that good fairies never arrive without a bad one

in their midst—that every silver lining has a cloud. I know a man who in the days of peace was half afraid of winning a first prize in the Irish sweepstake. He could not believe that such a Niagara of good luck would not be followed by a drought of something even more important—if, as he used to say, there is anything more important—than money. He took the same superstitions with him to the racecourse. I have been with him there when he had backed a winner at thirty-three to one, and have noticed his clouded brow as his horse passed the post. ‘What ’s going to happen next?’ he would say gloomily as the bookmaker handed him a wad of ill-gotten notes. On the other hand, if he backed a ‘dead cert’ heavily and it lost, he became unnaturally cheerful. ‘I always say,’ he once confided to me, after losing not only his shirt but his vest and pants on an occasion of this kind, ‘that everybody has a certain amount of luck, and that, if you lose it in betting, you get it in something else.’ Yet he went on betting. He felt it was a risky business in more ways than one. But he was certainly what Englishmen call ‘a good loser.’

In this respect he was, perhaps, a typical human being, for human beings seem always to have been afraid of the good fortune of becoming rich. We are brought up to believe that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God; and it is not only Christians who suspect that it is unlucky to be lucky with money. If you look up a dictionary of quotations you will find few reasons for a sensible man to desire to become wealthy. Seneca in his admirably named *Ad Polybium de Consolatione* declared: ‘A great fortune is great slavery,’ and elsewhere one of his characters says darkly: ‘Gilded ceilings disturb men’s rest, and purple robes cause watchful nights. Oh, if the hearts of rich men were laid bare, what fears would be seen therein!’ Lao-

Tsze is equally dispirited in his attitude to good financial weather. 'Great wealth,' he declares, 'implies great loss.' 'The greater your fortune,' says some other ancient, of whom I had never heard till I consulted the dictionary, 'the greater your cares.' Cynics may reply to all this that, as most people who write well are comparatively poor, the comments of authors on riches need not be taken more seriously than the fox's comment on the grapes. Still, I always remember the story of the millionaire—a man married to the lovely woman of his choice—who said on his deathbed to a friend of mine: 'Let me give you a bit of advice, Johnny. Never get rich. And never marry.'

Good fortune is obviously, on the whole, depressing. We all strive for it, but we seem somehow not to like it. We are afraid even of beauty, and say that it is only skin-deep. The things poets have written about beauty would, if women were logical, prevent any woman from ever going into a beauty parlour. For example:

Too bright, too beautiful to last.

and:

. . . What is beauty but a corse?  
What but fair sand-dust all earth's purest forms?  
Queens' bodies are but trunks to put on worms.

and:

Beauty, thou pretty plaything, death, deceit!  
That steals so softly o'er the stripling's heart.

Human beings, it seems, fear the gifts of the gods as though they were the gifts of the Greeks. They seem to have a notion that there is a compensating deity somewhere who will see to it that no gift is bestowed without an equalizing loss. The dread of Nemesis—the great equalizer—is very old. It is because of it, probably, that parents in some parts of the world become miserable if their

children are praised. Italian peasants, we are told, regard it as unlucky to hear compliments about their children, unless the compliment is accompanied by a 'God bless it' to avert bad luck.

I read recently a story about an eminent Chinese who, with the same fear of an all-ruling Nemesis, gave his daughters names meaning 'Nothing Extraordinary,' 'Not so Literary,' and 'Not so Pretty.' We should all like to boast, but we are afraid to boast. Some people felt gloomy when the church bells were rung the other Sunday. They felt that this was boastful, and that to feel happy even for a few minutes was unlucky. For happiness, too, we half distrust. A charming girl told me the other day that, when she informed her mother that she was engaged to be married, her mother said to her: 'I was singing this morning, and I knew from that that something awful was going to happen.' There is no end to the evil omens human beings can invent when they are happy.

Human beings, indeed, seem to be able to look on the bright side of things when things are not bright; but they seem incapable of looking on the bright side of things when things are bright. That is why, during the recent spell of fine weather, Englishmen said to each other, half gloomily and half with relish: 'We shall pay for this later.' They have always been like this, apparently, and they always will be. More than a hundred years ago Sydney Smith—see the dictionary of quotations—wrote to a friend in December: 'The weather is beautiful; but, as Noodle says (with his eyes beaming with delight), "We shall suffer for this, sir, by-and-by!"'







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